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WESTERN

ANC

SEPTEMBER 25¢

PILLORY JUSTICE By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

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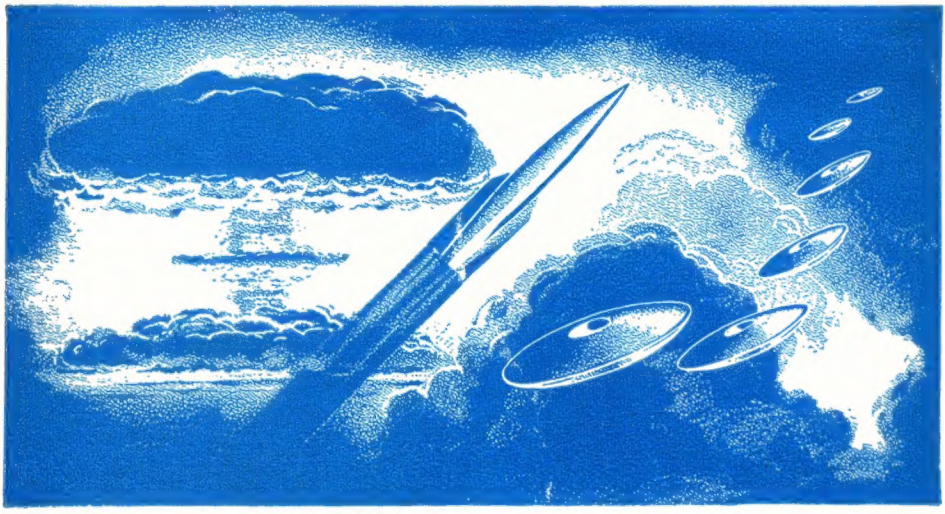

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

AT YOUR NEWSSTAND EVERY MONTH

WE'VE RETURNED from New York recently so loaded with western manuscripts, that it will take weeks of continuous reading to pick out the best of the lot.

AGENTS AND authors have worked closely with us to meet the high standards we hold to. As a result, we have so much good material, that it's going to be a herculean task to pick out the best.

AS YOU will remember, some months back (May 1950 MAMMOTH WESTERN) we wrote a rather heated editorial regarding the calibre of the current crop of western movies which were emanating from Hollywood.

IN LINE with this editorial, we want to commend the movie industry at this writing for two of its more recent westerns—"The Outriders" starring Joel McCrea and Arlene Dahl, and "The Gunfighters" starring Gregory Peck and Helen Westcott.

BOTH ARE mature films, tell stories which pack a terrific impact. They capture the adult imagination, and offer the excitement and story value of any of the better movies—no matter the subject. Both films are capably enacted by experienced actors, who do much to raise the films to a higher level than most of the other westerns.

BOTH OF these movies were covered by our own Hollywood reporter, Bernie Kamins, in our monthly feature department "Hollywood Corral", at the time of their production. Orchids to Bernie for picking each month for his column, an outstanding movie to cover for us, out of all the slush that gets thrown regularly on an unsuspecting—and ever-hopeful—movie-going public.

WE HOPE these two pictures are the beginning of a trend toward more intelligent westerns—movies produced with a thought to audience enjoyment, as well as increased box-office revenue.

PAUL W. FAIRMAN has done it again, with "Pillory Justice" (page 6). This is a deeply sensitive story, with a strong psychological twist. And it follows through logically to the very end. Paul's been toying with the idea for this novelette for many months.

IT WAS sometime last winter when your editors got the idea for this cover. We hashed it over and rehashed it. We worried about whether it would be too grim, or whether you western fans could take it.

THE FIRST painting that artist Walter Hinton showed us was really a vicious scene.

SO WE all got together and talked it over—a suggestion here and a retouch there—and we softened the illustration up considerably. Although maybe from where you're sitting, it's still plenty tough.

ANYWAY, PAUL happened to see the painting after Walter brought it in in its completed form, and told us an idea he'd been dreaming up, and that our cover scene just seemed a natural for it.

WE GAVE him the go-ahead, subject of course to our final acceptance—and he came up with what we consider a most intelligently handled plot. One that belongs in the category of "special" stories.

ROBERT EGGERT LEE comes back to MAMMOTH WESTERN'S pages, after a too-long absence, with the October lead novelette—"This Grave For Hire". This is strictly an action story, and will have you sitting on the edge of your chair with excitement and suspense until you reach the very end. The situations here fall into place so naturally, there are so many surprise twists, and the characters are true to form. We guarantee this will be one of your favorites.

SEE YOU next month.....LES

MAMMOTH WESTERN

SEPTEMBER, 1950

All Features Complete

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Front cover painting by Walter H. Hinton, illustrating
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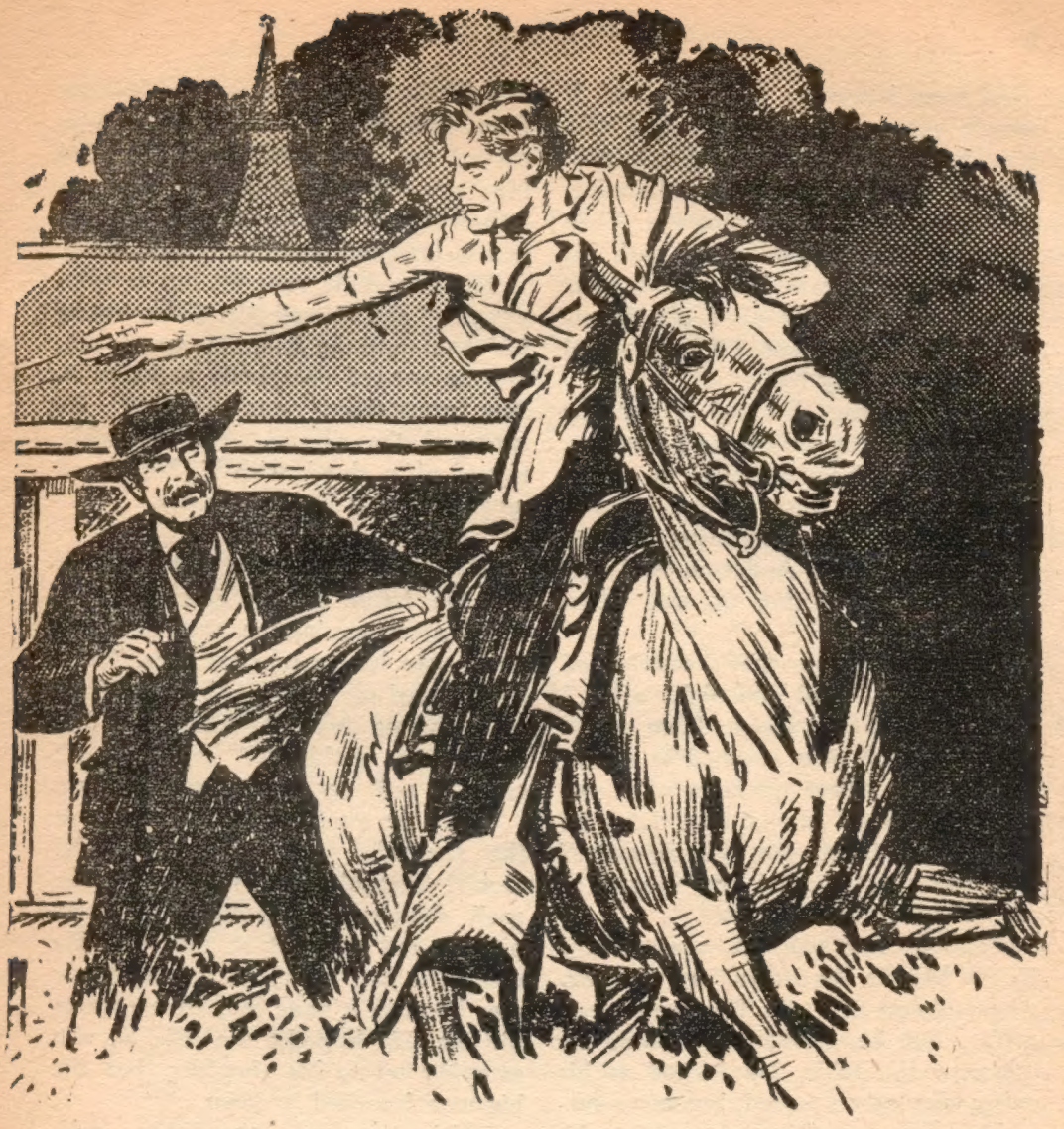
PILLORY JUSTICE

By Paul W. Fairman

The knife seemed to come right out of nowhere, and with a force of its own, head for his back



You had to have known this man—to have known the madness that drove him to his own destruction . . .

WE BURIED him the way he asked, out on a hill away from everything, lonely there against the sky. He said to call the hill Calvery and I did that, too. I just stood there over the grave, holding Jennifer's hand. I looked up into the sky and said, "From now on this hill will be called Calvery," just the way he asked to have it done.

Of course, saying that didn't mean anything really. There were a lot of hills all around, and no one would ever remember this particular one. But it meant something to me, and I know it was important to him.

So now it's over, and a lot of it wasn't very pretty. On the bad side was death and blood and black evil. But on the bright side was Jennifer. In the beginning, I had nothing. Then he came along, following the path his poor, tortured brain laid out. I went along, and out of it all I got Jennifer, and for her alone I'll be grateful for the rest of my life.

The beginning? For me it was one night on a farm outside of Lawrence, Kansas. The farm belonged to a man named Galen, a nice enough old fellow who'd gotten prosperous in spite of Quantrell and Anderson and the border raiders rioting up and down Kansas.

For some reason, they'd overlooked him—that is, until the night after I went to work for Galen. That night, about a dozen men stormed in out of nowhere. The first we knew of it was when we were just sitting down to supper and heard the "yip-yip-yaw!" and the pounding of the horses as they surrounded the house.

I knew that yell. It was the cry of the Middle Border raiders, and Mr. Galen knew it, too. He went dead white, but he didn't move from his place at the table. He looked at his wife, who wasn't scared, but more surprised than anything else. He said, "Go into the bedroom, my dear. Be very quiet and maybe they won't search the house. They're probably after the stock."

She did what he told her, and then the two of us sat there waiting. We didn't have to wait long. The door was jerked open and three men crowded into the kitchen. One of them was a sawed-off runt with a bad eye. The second looked like any roustabout you'd see in a saloon. But the third one stood out like a chicken hawk in a poultry yard.

He was one of the biggest men I ever saw, this third one. He had feet like fiddle cases lying on the kitchen floor, and his face could have been carved out of a sand butte. He had blue eyes—a pair of gimlets that cut into whatever he looked at—and the gun in his hand could have been a toy.

The sawed-off runt let out a "yip-yip-yaw" and shoved Mr. Galen out of his chair onto the floor. He was tough, and he wanted everybody to know it. The roustabout was hungry. He snatched the rib-roast off the table, ripped off a chunk with his bare hand and jammed it into his mouth.

THE BIG man's eyes went around the room, taking everything in. Then, after passing me, they cut back and began boring into my face. Those eyes scared me plenty. All I could see in them was death. It scared me, but there was nothing I could do. I couldn't pull my eyes away from his.

Then, the runt kicked Mr. Galen in the stomach. Galen yelled, "Don't! Don't! Please!" and that broke the spell someway. I grabbed the milk pitcher and threw it at the runt. He dodged it and looked at me in unholy glee because it gave him an excuse to kill me. He brought the rifle he was carrying up to his shoulder, but the big man knocked it down.

"We've got no time," he said. "Leave the kid alone." And then to me. "How much stock on the place?"

I hesitated and looked down to where Mr. Galen was groveling on the floor. His belly had probably been ruptured, and his face was full of agony. He moaned, "Give them anything they want! If they're friends of yours, tell them to take what they want and go away."

Friends of mine! That hit me, but I didn't have time to think about it because the big man took me by the collar and threw me toward the door. I went out the door into the yard. As I came through, I saw the circle

of mounted men. They yelled "yip-yip-yaw" and fired revolvers into the air. They acted exactly like a bunch of cowboys shooting up a town, but when the big man called out, "Let's get at it," they quit yelling and shooting and went to work.

There were eight good horses in the barnyard. The big man led his mount toward the barn, pushing me on ahead. He threw the gate open and stood beside it while a few of the men rode in.

"Are you related to him?"

I knew he meant Mr. Galen. I said, "No. I just work for him. I just came here yesterday."

"That's what he was talking about then."

"You mean about you being my friend?"

"He figures you're some kind of an advance agent for the gang." He laughed, and I could see his teeth flash white.

The horses were going past us to be swung up the north road away from Lawrence. The riders were working quietly now. I knew that further on there would be a bigger bunch waiting. Galen's had just been a stopover on the way to market. That was the way these gangs worked. They traveled through a section raiding maybe a dozen places in a single night. They kept on the move, and if a posse caught up with them, they stopped and fought it out. Usually, nobody bothered them. They were seldom chased unless they burned down a place or did some killing.

"You'd better come along with us," the big man said. "They're pretty hot around these parts. Your life won't be worth a nickel after we're gone."

He didn't have to explain that. The Civil War was over back east, but not in Kansas. Quantrell was keeping it alive. Men were shot down in the road for no reason. Bloodthirsty killers were loose all over the state, and feeling ran pretty high. On my way up from Texas, I'd seen two men taken out of a jail and strung up on the porch of a hotel. With Galen figuring me as a horse thief, my chances were pretty slim. It wasn't a time for standing on your constitutional rights of a fair trial.

BUT STILL, I didn't want to join up with a gang of horse thieves. "I'll hit out on foot," I said. "I had a horse, but your boys got him along with the rest."

The big man laughed again. "Come on. I'll get him back for you."

So, because I didn't want to take a chance on hanging from a tree by my neck, I climbed up behind him and rode away from Galen's farm, knowing I could never come back. "Where you heading for, mister?" I asked.

"My name's Hatch—Dave Hatch," he said, but he didn't answer my question. "Who are you, boy?"

"Spence Tolliver."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty-one in August."

Hatch didn't seem to be in any hurry, and later on I found out why. It was his head. He had an ache under his skull almost constantly, and when he had to ride fast the pain got unbearable.

We jogged along up the road, and finally he asked another question: "Where you from?"

"Texas."

He waited a minute and then yelled, "Well, damn it, don't be so close-mouthed! Talk up when you're asked! Is the law after you?"

I said it wasn't. "Nobody's after me. Things are pretty tough in Texas. They've got no money down there. Nothing but cows, and you can't live on beefsteak. We had a little spread, my dad and I, but most of our stock died from the fever. Dad got killed

in a saloon and there wasn't anything I wanted down there, so I struck out north."

"You say you had a spread?"

"There wasn't much to it. It'll go back to prairie."

"Been making a living?"

I knew Hatch wasn't the kind of a character who picked a man up for no reason. He had no call to care whether I lived or died or what happened to me. It made me wonder. "Just about," I said. "There's not much money up here either, from what I can see."

"That's damn foolishness. There's plenty of money. You know what we'll get for those horses? Even just those eight?"

"Seven," I said. "You told me you'd get mine back for me. Then, I'll be on my way and thanking you kindly."

HE DIDN'T say anything more for a while, and it seemed like he was pondering something over in his mind. He took off his hat and pushed the heel of his hand hard against his temple. He hit his head in a kind of odd, despairing way, and growled deep down in his throat. "I can't remember, damn it. It's like I know you from somewhere."

He was talking more to himself than to me while he kept pressing his temple. "It's damn funny," he said. Then, he jerked his hat back on and heeled the horse into a slow gallop. "We'll get you a horse," he told me, and that finished the talk.

We caught up with the bunch about a half hour later. Moonrise had come, and I could see about a hundred head with the gang shagging them into a mill. The runt and the roustabout seemed more important than the rest. They waited up for us and the runt pointed to me. "He riding with us?" The runt was scowling.

"He needs a horse," Hatch said.

"There's a hundred to pick from." The runt's good eye was slitted to match his scowl. The bad one was a blur in the moonlight.

"Not one of them yours."

The runt came up in his stirrups. Surprise wiped the twist off his face. "My horse! I'll see you and him in hell!"

"Okay," Hatch said. "You go first. We'll be along later." Then, he took his gun off his hip and fired one shot. Sitting behind him like I was, the powder flared up in my face and I pushed back fast and slid down over the horse's rump to the ground.

As my feet hit the dirt, I saw the runt standing up stiff in his stirrups. A gun was just dropping out of his hand. He pitched in our direction. His right foot caught and he hit the ground with the horse rearing around and dragging him in a circle. The horse's hoofs came down square on his chest, hard enough to crunch bone. But I knew the runt didn't feel it because I'd seen the hole in his forehead. He was as dead as he'd ever be.

"There's your horse," Hatch said. Then, to the roustabout: "We got enough. Take them south and get rid of them. I'll meet you in the hills." The roustabout nodded and turned away and Hatch looked down at me. "Well, what're you waiting for?"

"You—you killed him! You killed him over a horse! One of your own men!"

"He should have had more sense than to fuss with me when my head's like this. Get in the saddle."

"I'll walk. I don't want his horse."

"I said get in the saddle."

I DON'T know whether he'd have killed me or not. Maybe I'd have gotten a bullet for fussing with him when he had a headache, too. Or maybe he motioned with the gun while not intending to use it. I didn't find out

because I did what he told me. I got in the saddle.

"Let's go," he said, and I didn't feel like arguing about heading off on my own. It didn't seem the healthy thing to do. He started down the road and I swung in beside him. We rode in silence, leaving the runt where he'd fallen, and nothing happened except Hatch would occasionally push his hat back and grind the heel of his hand into his temple.

We rode for hours at a steady, mile-eating canter. We left the flat, green river land and went up into the rocky country where the road turned into a trail and finally disappeared altogether.

He had nothing to say. He seemed to have forgotten I was riding with him, and there were times I thought of cutting off the trail and leaving him. I had a good chance when, just after sunrise, he pulled up and said, "Damn it to hell! I've got to lie down."

He slid out of the saddle and went full length on the ground. He lay there on his back, both hands clapped against the sides of his head. I could have ridden away then, but I didn't. Maybe it was curiosity that held me. I climbed down and stood watching him. "What's wrong with your head?" I asked.

He didn't answer for a while. Then he said, "It aches. All the time it aches like holy hell, but sometimes worse than others."

"You ought to see a doctor."

"Damn doctors!"

Fifteen minutes later, he got up and we rode on. We rode until almost noon, and I was plenty hungry and thirsty when we came to a little sod lean-to, built against a rock wall in pretty wild country. He got off his horse without a word and walked into the shelter. I waited for almost five minutes and then went in after him. He was stretched out on a bunk and his eyes were tightly closed.

Without opening them, he said, "Take care of the horses and rustle yourself some grub. I've got to sleep. Wake me up when they come."

And that was that. I found a spring about fifty yards from the lean-to—or rather, one of the horses found it—and we all had a long drink. There was food inside the lean-to, but I was afraid of waking him up, so I dug around in the saddle bags and found some hard biscuits and ate them. Then, I stretched out in the shade of a rock to get some sleep, too.

IT DIDN'T come right away. There was too much milling around in my mind. Why was I staying there at all? I wondered. What kind of a fool was I to hang around a man who might shoot me just because he had a headache? Why didn't I get away while I had a chance? I was trying to figure out why when I went to sleep, and then there were horses coming up the trail and I awoke to find the sun low in the west.

When I got the blur out of my eyes, they'd ridden on past without seeing me, and were dismounting in front of the lean-to. I started to get up, and then stopped on one knee when one of them called out, "Hatch—you in there?" They stood side by side facing the cabin. One had a rifle half raised and the other one gripped a sixgun tight as it rested in its holster. I eased myself back down and waited.

The man yelled "Hatch" again, and there was a stirring in the cabin. Then, Hatch walked out—stopped just outside the doorway. He wasn't wearing his guns, and now the rifle was dead on him.

Hatch was scowling. "Where's Slim?" he wanted to know. "And the rest of them?"

I hadn't seen either of the men before, but when the one with the rifle

The shot spun Hatch around forcibly, and sent him falling through the lean-to door

spoke, he showed they were a part of the gang. "They didn't come. They just sent us, Dave. We're a delegation like."

"It's just that you're too handy with your irons, Dave." The other one said this as he pulled his gun. "You're a good leader, but none of us like to go around wondering when we'll be shot down in our tracks. There was Bates and Sanchez and now, last night, Pinky, because he didn't want to give up his horse."

You could see Hatch had the play figured all right. "Then, why don't you go on about your business?" he growled.

"And have you on our trail? That wouldn't be so good, Dave. Then, we'd never know but what you'd come storming in the next minute throwing lead. We like to sleep sometimes."

"So they sent us to kill you."

I don't know why I put my two cents in. I was crouched there without a gun, watching an argument that was none of my business, and I don't know why I had to let out a peep, but I did. As the rifle swung up, I gave a yell and dropped behind my rock.

I don't know what I expected, but that doesn't matter in such situations because the logical thing always goes right ahead and happens. There was

one shot. It spun Hatch around, bent him over a little, and sent him back through the lean-to door falling like a tree. All you could see were his boot-soles after he was down.

Even if I'd had a gun, I couldn't have gotten in a shot, because my yell made the two killers think they were in a trap, and they hit for cover like a pair of bunny cottontails.

I knew I had to have a gun or I was through, so I broke at the same time they did so as not to give them time to get set. I had to make the lean-to and Hatch's iron or they'd have picked me off like a sitting duck as soon as they found I was unarmed.

I KITED past their horses and went into the cabin with a long lunge. Thirty seconds later, I sent two slugs in the direction they'd gone. If they were a mite yellow-belly, that would hold them off a little while, I figured.

There was a breathing spell now that gave me a chance to look Hatch over. I found that he wasn't dead. His heart was beating at a pretty solid clip. I found a big welt on the right side of his head, but it had gotten too dark to examine it closely. There was some blood but not too much, and from what my fingers could tell me, the slug had only creased his skull.

It was now, I guess, that all idea of

leaving him went out of me. I'd only gone into the lean-to after his gun, but when I got there, I began thinking only about getting both of us out.

A half hour passed and he still hadn't moved a peg. He was unconscious with every indication that he'd stay that way a while. The two killers outside had been waiting for pitch darkness to move on the lean-to. It was pitch dark now, so something had to be done.

I could think of only one thing—pick him up and carry him away. The horses that the two killers had ridden were still standing in the open space in front of the lean-to where they'd been left. They were stamping and rattling their bits.

The logical thing for me to do was put Hatch over one of these horses and lead it away, so I didn't do that. I got him up on my shoulders after lifting him on the bunk first, and then walked out into the darkness and around the horses away from where the killers had disappeared. The horses kept on rattling their bits and stamping and maybe that covered my footsteps, but anyhow, I got two hundred yards through the rocks where I had to put Hatch down because he was almost breaking my back.

FEELING PRETTY satisfied with myself, I decided to risk going to the spring for our own horses, and that was where I made a kill. I made it because I walked with Hatch's gun poked straight out in front of me. One of the men was waiting by the spring, figuring I'd come there if I got out of the lean-to. I was walking on tiptoe in the inky blackness and practically pushed the gun square into his belly. He was dead before the noise of his scraping boots had finished coming into my ears.

I didn't wait for the other one. I didn't even stop for a saddle. I grabbed one of the lead ropes and hauled a horse back to where Hatch was lying. I got him over the horse like a sack of flour and started away, letting the horse find his path while I walked beside Hatch, holding him steady. We went quite a long way, and then the moon came up and we made even better time. When I stopped, finally, I was pretty sure it would take more than one killer to find us.

Hatch looked to be stone dead except for one thing—his heart was beating as steady as a clock. I found some water in a creek not far away and washed the wound in his head. Then, I bandaged it and kept it soaked with cold water because he was getting hot and red in the face.

I didn't know anything else to do so I just sat there wondering whether he was going to die or not. After a while, I got hungry and went out with the sixgun and managed to nail a rabbit that sat up on its hind legs a shade too long. I brought it back and roasted it over a fire, but Hatch was still out, so I ate most of it myself.

Just about sundown, he began to stir and I could see what was going to happen, so I tied his wrists and ankles with my shoe strings and kept wetting down the shirttail I'd used to bandage his head. After a while, he began straining against the bindings and mumbling to himself. Then he came out of it, just as I thought he would, in a wave of delirium, and I had to sit on him to hold him down.

I'll never forget the next hour—the weird, crazy things that came out of his head. "I'll slay mine enemies with the jawbone of an ass!" he yelled. "The walls of Jericho will fall from a blast of the trumpet of righteousness!"

Kind of funny talk from a murdering desperado, even if he was out of

his head. I'd sit on him while he fought and ranted and raved. Then, he'd get tired and lay back while I sluiced him with water. After that, we'd start all over.

In time, he got less violent during the spasms, like he was tiring himself out, and his mouthings weren't so bloodthirsty and warlike. I bent down close and heard him whispering, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He leadeth me beside still waters and maketh me to lie down...lie down... lie down..." Then, he drifted off to sleep and his lips stopped moving.

I SAT back and thought it over, thinking that all the time he hadn't yelled a single cuss word, which was also kind of strange for a man in his profession. And all that Bible quoting. I decided that somewhere back on his trail there must have been some good people—maybe a mother with a Bible who read those things to him, and now they were coming up out of his memory.

He slept uneasily for a while, still muttering, but a lot quieter now. The only thing I could make out was, "Brutus...dear Brutus...", a friend of his from somewhere maybe. Then he said, "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars...but in ourselves that we are underlings."

After that, he really went into a sleep, and he didn't feel quite so hot. I was pretty tired myself, so I stretched out and I guess I went to sleep in less than a minute.

That went on more or less the same, for two days. On the morning of the third day, I woke up to find him staring at me silent but, from his eyes and his expression, cold sane. His eyes were on me, not mad any more, and the only thing in his face was complete bewilderment.

I got up and went over and said, "You feeling better now, Mr. Hatch?" He didn't answer, but the bewilderment deepened. I knelt down and took the shoe strings off his wrists and ankles. He didn't move a finger while I did this.

I said, "You had a pretty close call, but I take it you're feeling better now. Does your head still ache?"

When he answered, it was even in a different voice. I can't explain how. It was just—different. "My head? No. My head doesn't ache, son. But—but I don't understand. How did you get here? I saw Marco and Tillstrom kill you. I saw them bury you."

I laughed. "You been having a bad time, Mr. Hatch. You've been out of your head and probably dreamed that. I killed one of those men who came after us. Then, I got you away."

That had its effect. His eyes widened and he came up to a sitting position. In his face, it was as though I'd done a loathsome thing. "You killed? You—my son? You have a man's blood on your hands?"

I could see he was pretty well mixed up. That, and something else I couldn't even begin to figure out. "Look, Mr. Hatch. It wasn't any time to be squeamish. They'd already shot you, and would have got both of us if they could. It was us or them."

"How did you find out Marco and Tillstrom had taken me to the desert house?"

"The desert house? I don't get you. I don't know anything about a house in the desert. There was the sod lean-to—"

HIS EYES were cutting into me now. He motioned. "Wait—wait. Come here. Come closer."

I went close and I could see a strangeness in his face that I can't describe. He passed one of his big

hands over my head and face. "Why, you aren't Matthew! You're not my son! Who are you? Speak up, boy, and tell me!"

I backed away. "You're right about that. I'm not your son—and my name's Spence Tolliver. I never saw you before the other night at Galen's farm."

"Galen's farm?"

I sat down cross-legged and looked at him. I said, "Mr. Hatch, we aren't getting anywhere. We're each talking about different things and different people, even. That is, I think so. The two men I mean were from your gang. I don't know what their names were. One of them shot you when you came out of the lean-to. Does that make any sense to you?"

He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Nothing seems to make any sense." He sat for three or four minutes, silent, staring out over my head. Then he told me, "Please go away. I've got to think. I've got to be alone."

I went to the creek for some water. I brought it back in my hat and set it down next to him. As he turned away, he was looking at his own clothes—rubbing them with his hands as though he'd never seen them before. "Where are we?" he called after me. "What place is this?"

I told him it was somewhere in the Missouri hill country quite a ways out of Lawrence, and that seemed to take something out of him—break him down—because he bent forward and put his face into his hands. I took the gun and went out to look for a rabbit. I was gone three hours.

When I got back, I found him still sitting where I'd left him. He looked as though he hadn't moved the whole time. But plenty had happened. Plenty.

It had happened inside him, because you could see he'd changed. I can't put into words how he'd changed, but it was there to see. Does it sound silly to say a man can change and become another man in a matter of hours? Maybe so, but that's what had happened. His craggy face was even more rugged and his eyes weren't a killer's eyes any more. Now, they were full of a kind of blind agony. But how can I tell you? Maybe like this?

Did you ever see a high spirited horse that had been held by a rope and whipped? It rears up and there is a look in its eyes; a look that's a mixture of rage and pain and fear. Maybe that will give you some idea and maybe it won't, but that's as close as I can come.

I said, "You feeling better now, Mr. Hatch?"

He regarded me silently for almost a minute. "Hatch, did you say?"

I didn't get it. "Yes. I said how are you feeling now?"

"The name is Samuel Hackett, son. I don't know where the Hatch came from."

I COULDN'T think of anything to say, so I waited, thinking he'd start asking questions. But he didn't. I skinned the rabbit and cooked it and we ate it together. He didn't say a word. Neither did I.

And so help me, nothing was ever again said between us about Hatch, the murderer and leader of a band of Kansas horse thieves. I've wondered about that a lot, and I've come to a conclusion that may be right or may be wrong.

I think he was afraid to ask.

You may wonder, too, why I stayed with Hackett—why I started out with him and covered the long trail that followed, always riding by his side. If so, you'll have to keep on wondering, because I can't tell you why. Even before I knew where we were going and what he really

was, I had given up all thought of following my own trail. And it wasn't talked over between us, either. I could stay or go—so I stayed.

To know the why of it, you'd have had to know Hackett. First, he wasn't a man you talked to—a man you asked about things. If you went along with him at all—you went along in the dark wondering what was coming next and waiting to find out. He walked or rode with his head up—always—held high, with his eyes looking straight ahead as though seeing over the next hill for what was on the other side. His mind always seemed full of big things—much bigger than any of the little ones I could think of to ask about. So I didn't ask about anything, except a week later when we were over beyond the hill country and had bought another horse and a couple of saddles with the money he had in his pockets. Then I said, "Where are we going, Mr. Hackett?"

He looked at me as though I should have known, as though I'd asked a foolish question. "We're going back, of course. Back to Montana."

"Have you got friends there?"

He didn't answer. I don't know whether he even heard me. So we rode out of Kansas, side by side into the northwest.

ONE DAY, I got a big surprise. It came when we hit a good-sized town in Wyoming. I don't remember the name of the town, but that doesn't matter. We rode in and got a room at the hotel and then I put the horses away. I ate supper and came back and Mr. Hackett wasn't in the room, but his clothes were; the worn-out levis, the red shirt and even the high-heeled boots. I couldn't figure him wandering away in his underwear, so

Fear and a blind agony were in his heart

I decided he must have bought some new clothes. I wondered what kind he'd bought. Then, I threw his old duds off the bed and laid down for a nap.

I slept for about an hour, and when I woke up he still wasn't back. I washed my face and went down into the street figuring to kill a little time until he turned up.

It was right here that I realized how important he'd become in my life. Living with a thing like that, you sometimes don't realize it until it suddenly hits you over the head. It hit me when I found I was only thinking about one thing—like a hen with a single chick. Where had Mr. Hackett gone? Had he gotten into some kind of trouble? When would he be back? I could have been sitting in a saloon drinking beer and watching the girls and enjoying myself. I had forty dollars, and I could even

have been playing a little poker. But no—I was wandering up the street wondering what had happened to this strange man who had turned out to be somebody else. A man I knew almost nothing about.

That's when I realized I was a hen that had somehow collected myself a chick. And I didn't argue with the idea or fight with it. I just recognized it.

While I was thinking about it, I turned a corner and found Mr. Hackett. I stood there looking at him with my mouth hanging open. I should have been used to surprises by now, but this one nailed me to the board sidewalk.

He was standing on a box in the middle of the street. A couple of kids were standing on each side of him holding flares, and I could see the new clothes he'd bought. They were black; all black except for the white shirt I could see above his tight buttoned vest. Black coat and pants and black boots with a black hat and string tie. He was waving the hat in his left hand and the book he held in his other hand—up over his head—could have been only one thing—a Bible.

There was a crowd of maybe three or four hundred people around him—all kinds of people. There were cow pokes with guns hanging on their hips and cigarettes hanging in the corners of their mouths. There were fat men, thin men, tall men and short men; women who had ducked out of their houses with shawls over their heads; kids sucking their thumbs and staring round-eyed.

AND THE whole mob was as silent as a bunch of dead people. And right away, I knew why. It wasn't so much what he said. It was his voice. It was the kind of a voice you don't hear very often. Like thunder over a mountain with storm clouds far up and black; a little like big bells sounding out of a cathedral tower. It must have been the voice, because he was laying into them tooth and nail, and they took it.

"In the war between good and evil!" he thundered, "the eternal war between Satan and Heaven, there is no neutrality! You are all—every one of you—friends of God or friends of the Devil! God's soldiers openly espouse His holy cause, and even though you love Him but remain mute, you are an emissary of the evil one!"

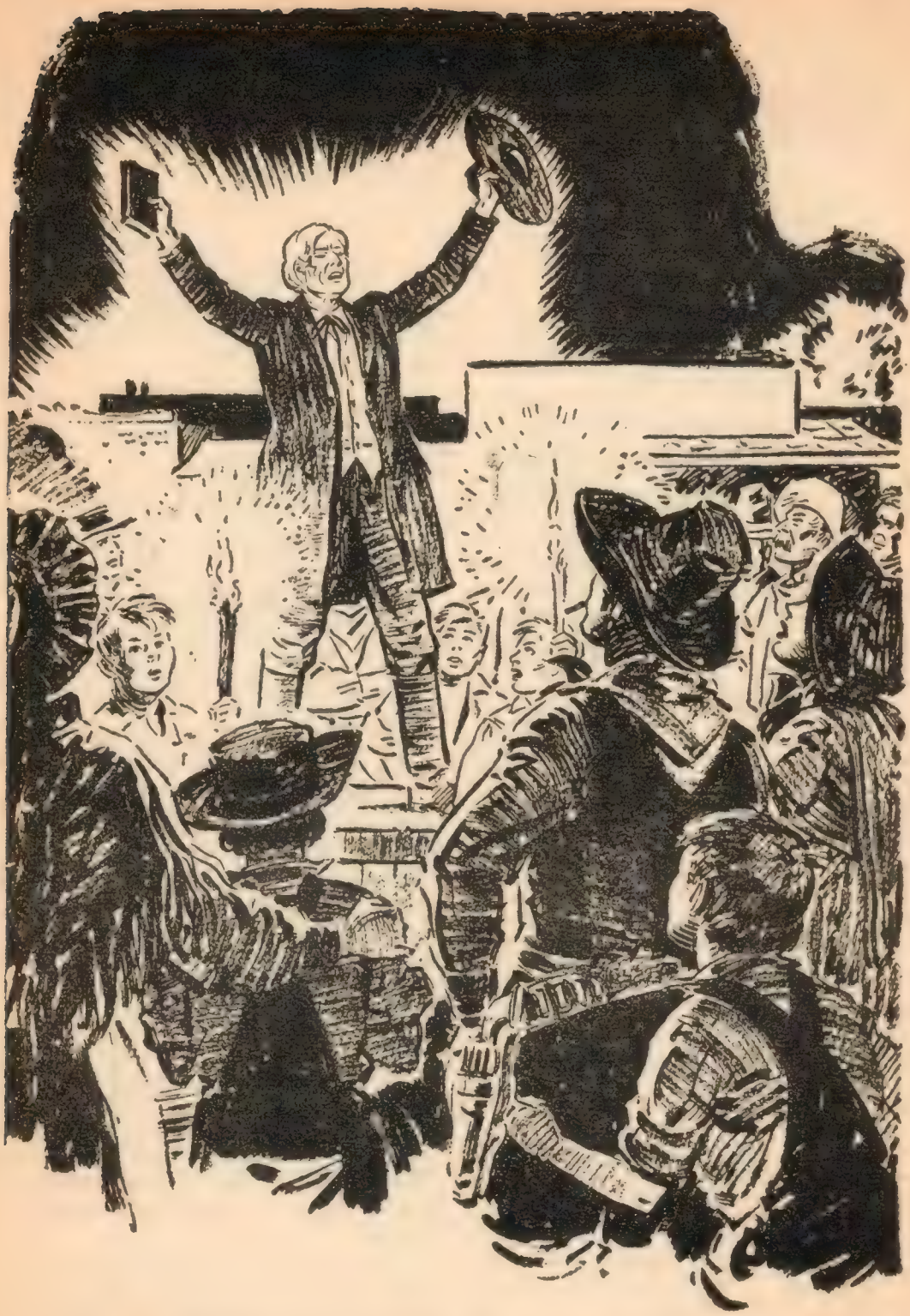
He waved the Bible and glowered down at them. "How many of you," he wanted to know, "wear God's insignia? How many of you have felt upon your foreheads the glorious waters of baptism? A miserable few of you, if any at all!"

This must have been going on for quite a while, because he had a spell over the crowd. I heard a few Amens sounded here and there while he stopped to catch a breath and then blasted out again.

"And now, who among you will accept Him this blessed night? He has sent me, His recruiting officer, to enlist you in his ranks. Who will accept Him?"

The Amens were pretty generously sprinkled around now, and he called out, "Then follow me! Mothers, bring your children, your little ones! Men, bring your sins to be cleansed away with God's holy water!"

He came down off the box and a path opened for him through the crowd. He strode right past me but he was looking straight ahead and he didn't know I existed. I kept my mouth shut and tagged along.



"...bring your sins to be cleansed away..." he was yelling with a fanatic fervor

He went to a water trough on down the street, and most of the crowd went with him. Some of them didn't bother, a share of the cow pokes and the other men. They grinned and chatted among themselves and drifted back into the saloons. But there were a lot of them that crowded around to watch the others line up alongside the watering trough and wait their turn to join God's arm.

It was the women mostly who wanted baptism. A few men, but mostly women, dragging their kids toward the trough with grim, exalted looks on their faces.

The torches were brought close and he went to work with his big hands, dipping the water, bending them over backwards, praying for them and blessing them. Some of the kids squalled and struggled. Some of the women moaned out shrill Amens. Others went to their knees and began telling about their sins out loud. I saw one young woman roll in the dirt until two men, maybe her relatives, picked her up and carried her away.

The flares threw out shadowy light and the water splashed until there was mud all around the trough. It was a scene I was never going to forget. After watching a while, I went back to the hotel and went to bed.

I lay there looking up at the ceiling, thinking about the strange character I'd teamed up with. Those big hands. I'd seen them grab a gun and kill a man because their owner had a headache. I'd seen them dip a little kid's head into a horse trough and start the kid on his way to heaven.

I thought a lot about Dave Hatch-Sam Hackett; about Matthew, the son he'd taken me for. I wondered what had happened to Matthew, and I wondered about Marco and Tillstrom and the desert house.

I went to sleep before he came back to the room.

I'VE GONE too long without telling you how I met Jennifer. To me, that's the most important part of the whole affair. It was about a month later, after we'd traveled a long way northwest and had come within a few miles of a small town called LaClede in Montana. LaClede, it turned out, was the "home" we'd been heading toward all those miles.

We came in across a strip of desert, just at sundown. Mr. Hackett said, "We're almost there. We'll camp tonight and go in in the morning."

It was all right with me. I'd gotten used to his talking about things I knew nothing of; talking about them as though I'd been there before and knew all about them.

We pitched a dry camp, fried some bacon and had supper. Then Hackett read his Bible by the light of the campfire, something he'd done every night of the trip. I rolled up in my blanket, but I didn't go to sleep right away. I lay there wondering what went on in the mind behind that big, intense face of his. He'd never said anything more about his son Matthew. I wondered if he was thinking about him.

About an hour later, just as I was dozing off, Hackett got up and walked out of camp. A minute later, I heard him saddling his horse. By the time he rode away, I was dressed and swinging a saddle on my own horse.

I don't know why I followed him without any twinges in my conscience. Maybe because we were back in the country where his son had been killed, where there had been some dark and violent deeds, or maybe just out of plain curiosity.

The moon was full, making it almost daylight, and I held back, keeping him just in sight. But I could probably have ridden right on his horse's heels, because he traveled with his face turned to the horizon as usual, never once looking back.

After about four miles, he got off his horse and I lost sight of him beyond a rise. I dismounted, too, and moved up on foot. I circled and came in from an angle. Close up, I dropped on my belly and peeked down over the ridge.

He was standing beside what looked to be a grave—what was a grave, because I could see the mound and a rude cross, tilting just a little from having been there for quite a while.

Hackett didn't kneel by the grave. He just stood beside it with his head bent forward. He'd left his hat in camp, and his bushy hair threw a shadow on his face making it unreadable. He stood for maybe twenty minutes while I lay there watching him.

Then he said, "This is Matthew's grave. This is where he lies buried. My son. He died defending a girl's honor."

I got hot and red when I realized he was talking to me. It was the same feeling you'd get if someone found you peeking in their window. He didn't raise his head or move his eyes from staring down at the mound, and I got to my feet pretty sheepish and stood there with nothing to say.

BUT THE part of him I could never get used to was in evidence now. He said nothing at all about my sneaking along behind him. It was as if his mind was always on bigger things kind of; as though it didn't bother registering petty little items like being spied on; as though it was something of no importance.

I came down over the ridge and stood beside him, and the silence was heavy. I had to break it. "Back in Kansas, you thought I was your son. Did he look like me?"

"He looked a great deal like you."

"I think you said he was...murdered."

After a pause, he said, "It is all recorded in God's book of remembrances."

"You mean you aren't going to do anything about it?"

His great somber face darkened a little, I thought, but maybe I was wrong. "Vengeance belongs to the Lord," he said. "I will go on with my work."

These were more questions than I'd ever asked before. "Just—just what is your work, Mr. Hackett?"

"The Lord's work. Struggling with the Devil. Cleaning away the cesspools of sin."

That was pretty general, but I had to be satisfied with it because he turned away from the grave now and walked back to his horse. He said no more and made no motion. I could go with him or stay where I was, it made no difference. It dawned on me now, sharply, that here was a man who walked alone. If you went with him, it was your affair. It was a tantalizing sort of independence.

I watched him ride away, and then went back to my own horse. Hackett didn't head directly toward camp. He swung off a trifle to the left, and I watched him until he pulled up and sat looking toward some place that was cut off from me by the ridges. He sat there for a long time, long enough to tell me that he was looking at something; that he hadn't just stopped. After maybe fifteen minutes, he pulled his horse around and started toward our camp. Five minutes later I was at the place he'd been,

looking down at what he'd been staring at.

I don't know how I knew it was the desert house, but I did. It sat in the middle of a small pocket of meadowland, a kind of oasis in the desert. Pretty land, but under the moon it was a melancholy, depressing scene. A stone building with the chimney half fallen away and black window-eyes, it appeared long deserted and forgotten; by-passed and forlorn there in the tall whispering grasses.

Just beyond it was another, smaller building, evidently for animals. I got a funny feeling, kind of empty, looking down at the place. So this was where Hackett's troubles had started, where his tragedy had been enacted. The two names came back to me —Marco and Tillstrom. Who were they? Why had they killed Matthews Hackett, and what had they done to Sam Hackett?

I heeled my horse and rode slowly down the incline. My horse went into the knee-deep grass, and the window-eyes of the house grew larger.

THEN, TWO things happened at once. I found the desert house wasn't deserted—and I met Jennifer.

I don't know how I'd missed her before—probably because I was concentrating on the house. She was sitting on a boulder at the edge of the meadowland about two hundred yards from the buildings. She was leaning backwards, her arms propped against the rock and her face was turned upward, almost toward the moon but not quite. Her dark hair was loose. In great abundance, it hung straight down over her shoulders. She wore a white blouse that her posture pulled tight against her breasts, and the line of her profile, her throat and her bosom took my breath away.

A brightly colored gypsy skirt came to her knees, leaving her smooth brown legs bare, and I could see that her feet were also bare.

She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life.

After I'd dismounted and started across the meadow toward her, I found myself walking softly, on tip-toe, without knowing why. Then I was standing beside her, there by the boulder, and found my first glimpse had not been an illusion to be broken. She was beautiful. It was no mirage.

All the time I'd been approaching, she hadn't moved a hand or a foot or one muscle of her slim body. Her head remained at the same tilted angle.

I felt awkward, out of place as I tried to think of something to say. Finally I said, "Hello," the most original thing I could think of.

I thought she hadn't seen me, and I was fearful of frightening her. But I didn't frighten her. She smiled and said, "It's up there, isn't it? It's big and round and beautiful."

"What's up there?"

She laughed softly in her arched throat. "The moon, silly."

"Sure it is. Do—do you live here? There in that house?"

"Yes."

"You surprised me. I thought the place was deserted."

"It was until we came. Nora and I. I love it out here. I can feel things."

"My name is Spence Tolliver. I'm—"

"Don't tell me! I know! I can tell. You're young—not more than twenty-two or three. You're fairly tall and slim."

"That's right," I said, wondering why she was playing the guessing game without looking at me.

"But the moon—tell me about it. How big is it? They say it's bright and yellow—yellow—is that nice?"

I felt a little chill go over my body.

"Yes," I said. "It's very nice."

"And it's very cool. I know that because it always comes with cool breezes."

AT THAT moment I hated God! My heart tightened up inside me, and I could have screamed out at Him for His cruelty. In complete silence, I stepped around in front of her and leaned close to her face, letting the moon come over my shoulder. The nearness of her face—her breath mingling with mine—made me dizzy. I looked into her eyes, and it almost broke my heart.

They were beautiful eyes, clear and liquid—wide open and eager. But deep in the pupils there was a stillness, an emptiness, as forlorn as spring blossoms crying for rain.

I stepped back and it was a cruel thing to say, but I didn't think of that because it was so fiercely important to me: "How long have you been blind?"

"Since I was five years old. I was sick then, for a long time. When I got well, I couldn't see anymore."

"I—I'm sorry."

Her hand came out, reaching. I twisted around, quickly and sat down on the boulder beside her so the small brown hand could fall on my shoulder. Her laugh tinkled, and it occurred to me that if I'd have been sitting on hot spikes I still wouldn't have moved a hair's breadth. The touch of her hand would have been worth it.

"Don't feel badly," she said. "I remember a little of what it was like. I remember there were colors—light and dark—and a world of beautiful things. But somehow, I don't remember the moon! That's strange, isn't it?"

"It—it isn't much, really. Just a big yellow ball."

"Don't say that. I know it's beautiful, too. I can see in a way. My own way. For instance, you—I know you're tall and young because of your voice—where it comes from and how it sounds. I know you're slim, because your footsteps after you got off your horse were very soft and light."

The hand on my shoulder began exploring. It slid up my neck and touched my cheek, brushed my eyes, nose and lips, and she laughed again. "You're very good-looking, too. What color are your eyes?"

"Blue," I said.

"Mine are brown. And I guess they aren't very—"

Somehow, I couldn't let her say what she was going to. It hurt to think she could believe such a thing. "Stop it! Your eyes are—are wonderful. But you haven't told me your name."

"Jennifer. Jennifer Marco."

Marco! I must have moved—must have given her some way of knowing I was startled—because her face came around and her eyes, for all their blindless, questioned me.

IT WAS just at that moment when the rifle cracked. There was the whine of an insect, and a hornet stung the lobe of my right ear. From pure instinct, I went loose and down behind the boulder, pulling Jennifer with me. The rifle whanged again and rock dust splattered above us.

It was one of those moments you can't afterward interpret rightly. During the few seconds of dead silence, it seemed I heard a sudden wailing sound like that of a young baby. I thought a light flashed in the dark stone house—through one of the windows. But these things were only in passing. My mind was centered on the girl I held tight in my arms.

For me it was just somebody taking a shot at me from the ridges, and with a rock to hide behind, it

was nothing. But Jennifer's face was close to mine, turned upward to the light of the moon, and I saw pure terror there. And I understood.

With the blind, it is all so much different. The blind sharpen their senses to cope with an unseen world. But, regardless of brave fronts, they walk in a dark room, forever on the defensive. So when some danger threatens, they—in their helplessness—are doubly terrified.

I saw this. I saw what the shots in the night did to her. The dark fear in her flowed from her body into mine and caused a reaction within me.

It drew a red curtain over my eyes and flailed all reason out of my brain, and when I got to my feet I was ready to kill. I said, "It's all right," and got up and started toward the ridges. I didn't have a gun or even a knife, but I didn't care. I had two hands, and whoever had fired that rifle had a throat. All I had to do was get my hands on that throat.

I ran across the land in full view, outlined by the moon, and I should have been killed. But I didn't think of that; I didn't care. So I wasn't killed. There were two more shots, one of which tagged me lightly on the right shoulder. There was the empty snap of a rifle hammer, and a curse. Then, I was on him.

He was big; over six feet, and broad from shoulder to shoulder. He was strong, but that made no difference. The poor devil never had a chance because I was no longer sane. I'd been turned into a thing without reason. Like all killing animals, I went straight for the throat and I got it. My hands dug in and he thrashed around while I tried to tear his throat out and beat his head to a pulp against a rock.

Pretty soon, he didn't thrash around any more.

BUT REASON came back in time—just in time. I released my grip and took my knees out of his stomach. I squatted there beside him, breathing heavily. Then, my eyes cleared and I looked him over.

He had to be somewhere in his forties, maybe older. There were deep lines in his face—not pleasant lines—but etched with the bitterness that was also in his expression when he came to and stared up at me.

"You'd better go on and finish it," he said. "You'd better kill me, because I'll kill you if I get the chance."

I didn't say anything. I stepped over and picked up his rifle and began ejecting shells, wondering why the gun had misfired. The man sat up, wearily rubbing his throat. His eyes were filled with defeat.

"I knew you'd come, you yellow swine," he said. "I knew you couldn't stay away. Night after night—month after month—I waited. And now—this!" He dropped his face into his hands and sat there.

I said, "You've got me mixed up with somebody else, mister. I couldn't come back because I've never been here before. You've got me mixed up with somebody else, and you're not the first one!"

He raised his head slowly and looked up into my face. There were several expressions to be read, and I ticked them off. There was blank hatred. It changed into a searching scowl and the scowl stayed, overshadowed by surprise and bewilderment.

"My name is Spence Tolliver," I said. "I'm from Texas."

He didn't offer me his name. He said, "What are you doing out here miles from anywhere in the dead of night? What are you doing sneaking around that house, talking to that girl?"

I got a little hot. I said, "Look, mister. A friend of mine—Sam Hackett—and I are riding through here. I just happened to come on this place. Seems to me you're the one who's doing the sneaking."

His eyes had widened and he grabbed my arm. "Hackett! Did you say Sam Hackett? Is he back?"

"I just told you I was riding with him."

His hand dropped to his side and he seemed suddenly to have a lot to think about. "Is Sam heading for town? For LaClede?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

A half-grin now, but one with no humor in it. "Is Sam still busy cleaning out his cesspools of sin?"

I didn't answer, and he broke out into a laugh. The laugh grated on me like teeth scratched over a pearl button. It grated while the man rubbed his throat where my nails had gone in deep.

"Sure," he said, "that's the only thing Sam Hackett lives for—to make other people see things his way. But he's due for a surprise, young fellow. A big surprise. There isn't any sin left in LaClede—not the kind he worries about. You tell him I said that."

The man wasn't making any sense so far as I could see. "He'll be in LaClede tomorrow," I said. "Why don't you tell him yourself?"

"Then I'll see him there." He climbed into the saddle and wheeled the horse away. He sat on the horse like a man carrying a load; like a man weary deep down in the bone. "My name's Marco," he called back. "Dane Marco. Tell Sam you saw me."

WITH THAT he rode away, leaving me with questions of my own to mull over. It added up fast. The girl's name was Jennifer Marco. Then the man, Dane Marco, was certainly her father. But that only brought more questions. From what the girl had said, she was living out here with someone named Nora. Her father evidently lived somewhere else. What kind of a father was he to let a blind daughter live away from him—out in the desert?

There was a partial answer to that. I'd seen enough to know the old man was laying for someone and using his daughter as a decoy. At least, that was how it looked to me. He'd taken pots at me and been crossed up. Then he'd ridden away, which seemed mighty strange to me. Maybe I wasn't the man he'd been after, but he still didn't know me. Then why hadn't he stayed around to protect his daughter?

I got the answer to that pretty quick when I went down into the meadowland again. Jennifer was gone from the boulder, but there were lights shining in the house, so I kept on going until I was standing in front of the door. It was a heavy door and it was closed. I knocked on the panel.

The door swung open—wide—and I was staring into the black hostile eyes of a woman. She was middle-aged and looked a lot like the man I'd just come within an inch of killing. Her face was bleak and hostile, and she had a double-barreled shotgun trained on my middle. "What do you want?"

"I was talking to Jennifer over by the rock and there were some shots that scared her. I wanted to see if she's all right."

"Never mind about that. Get on your horse and ride out of here, or I'll kill you where you stand."

"Look lady, I—"

Sometimes you get an instinct about such things, as when a shotgun is going to be fired. I got that instinct and it said: Don't quibble.

Do exactly what the lady says.

I dived sideways with a desperate lunge, just a shade ahead of a charge of buckshot. The gun roared like a cannon, and the pellets on the edge of the charge cut through the leather of my boots as I sailed out of range. If I hadn't moved, I'd have been blown in two.

It was a time for getting away from there, not for arguing. So I got. I went back to my horse and climbed aboard and rode away from the desert house. As I moved, I could feel that woman's cold eyes boring into me through the now darkened window; black eyes peering along the barrel of a shotgun. I knew then why Dane Marco hadn't been worried about the safety of his daughter. I decided the old lady must have been asleep while I'd been talking to Jennifer by the boulder. That made me a pretty lucky guy.

I RODE out of the meadowland and back to our camp. The fire was out and Hackett was rolled up in his blankets. I didn't know if he was asleep or not, but after I staked my horse out I walked up to where he was lying and said, "On the way back, I met a man who told me his name was Dane Marco. He said he'd see us in LaClede, if that's where we're going."

He rolled over and lay looking up at the sky. "Yes. We'll be in LaClede in the morning." That was all.

I got into my own blanket, and found my mind was too full to let me be sleepy. For a few minutes, I thought of the pieces I'd gotten together and tried to fit them into a picture; a picture that would include Jennifer, Sam Hackett and his son Matthew, the old lady with the shotgun, and also Dane Marco and someone named Tillstrom. I couldn't even begin.

But I didn't try very long because I only wanted to think about one of them—Jennifer.

I guess love comes to different people in different ways. I've heard with some people it takes a long time; it kind of seeps in and drips on them until they realize it's there. But others go along and all of a sudden it hits them square in the teeth. With me, it had happened in a split second; the instant I saw her leaning against the boulder there in the moonlight, something inside me had said: There's your woman. That lovely thing is all you'll ever want or need in this world. Just a slim outline against the night, but I knew. The feeling that comes once and never, never comes again.

That's why—when I found she was blind—the pain was a deep tangible part of me. Why my first thought was wishing I could give her my own eyes along with my heart. And maybe why her being blind made her seem—now—ten times more wonderful.

There was only one big problem in my mind as I watched the lowering moon. Could I make her understand how I felt? Could I prove it was love and not pity?

Then, a thought with a little sickness in it: Would I be able to make her love me? Would she give me the chance to spend my life trying to give her happiness?

Just before I went to sleep, I thought of something else—Dane Marco's odd laughter and what he'd said about no sin in LaClede. I wondered what he'd meant. The next morning I found out.

WE WERE up at dawn and had a quick breakfast and by the time the sun was six inches off the horizon, we were riding north. We rode for about an hour, and then I saw something ahead of us that I knew was a

town. It grew larger and even when we were far enough away to see only the shape of the buildings, I got an odd feeling about the place; a feeling I couldn't define, but one that something was wrong. We rode on and the town got larger. We hit the main street and a wind had come up. Not a big wind, but it made whirlpools of dust in the street that danced around the legs of our horses and seemed to be laughing at us. The same wind spun a shutter on one of the windows —a shutter hanging by one hinge— and there was the bang of wood on wood—a hollow lonesome sound.

Lonesome because the town itself was empty and lonely and deserted. No people in the streets; no horses standing in front of the hitching racks.

I don't know what LaClede had been, but now it was a ghost town standing empty in the desert under the hot sun.

I didn't have time to look and see how Hackett was taking it because, just then, a man stepped from the door of one of the buildings ahead and stood in the street waiting for us. The house he came from was more alive than the others. It was a saloon front with clean glass and water in the horse trough out front.

The man was Dane Marco. He stood silent, his arms folded, until we rode up and pulled to a stop. He said, "Hello, Sam. Long time no see."

Sam Hackett turned his big frame slowly in the saddle, his eyes going in a circle, taking in the desolation. He said, "What happened, Dane? What devil's plague fell upon our town?"

Marco shrugged. He pointed up toward the hills where there were scarred surfaces standing out in sharp relief. "The diggings wore out. Don't know as you'd call it a plague. They dried up about a year ago and the people began drifting away. In six months, they were all gone. Nobody left now but four or five old desert rats still scrabbling around in the hills."

Hackett stared bleakly at the saloon in front of which Marco was standing. Marco followed his eyes and smiled. There was something like grim satisfaction in the smile. "It's still here, Sam. My cesspool of sin. It outlasted the sinners."

"Why did you stay with all of the town gone?"

Marco considered, and somehow I knew what he said was a cover-up; words that meant nothing. "I had quite a little stock left. I decided to hang around and finish it off myself. Every time I take a drink, I put a dime in the drawer."

Marco turned and pointed on down the street. "Your place is still there too, Sam. Too bad your congregation walked out on you. Looks like you'll have to preach to a lot of empty benches."

I LOOKED where he was pointing and saw what had evidently been a church. A severe-looking building with a little steeple, and some of the glass broken out of the narrow windows. And there was something else that held my attention.

In front of the church was one of those things you see in old books about New England and the Puritans —a post set in the ground with horizontal planking on the top end. In the planking were three holes, one to go around a man's neck, and two smaller ones for his wrists. It was called a stock, I think, and it was used to hold a prisoner helpless while he was beaten with a whip. Or maybe the prisoner just stood there in the thing while he repented of his sins or was supposed to.

I wondered about the stock, but I didn't have to wonder long. Marco was talking again, talking to the cold,

silent Sam Hackett. There was a deep, vengeful joy in Marco's manner and in his words: "Your contraption's still there too, Sam. Hasn't ever been used since you went out, all full of fire and righteousness, and put it up that day. Remember?"

Sam Hackett said nothing, but I could see the man was suffering under Marco's words.

"You were righteous as all hell that day, Sam. Sounding off about how final vengeance was the Lord's, but sinners must be brought out and punished in the clear light of day before the people's eyes."

Marco was having too good a time to stop there. He didn't seem to see Hackett's big hands clenching as he went on: "You were going to bring Dick Tillstrom in and whip the sin right out of his body. Cut his hide to pieces so the evil would flow out and all the people could see it."

Marco wasn't having fun any more. He was leaning forward, his own fists clenched, and now there was only wild bitterness in his voice. "You were going to whip him in public and spread my shame in front of all the people! How come you didn't do it, Sam?"

Hackett's great voice boomed out: "Stop it, Dane Marco! In God's name, stop it!"

But Marco wasn't ready to stop. He was bellowing now, too. "How come you turned hypocrite and slunk off like a yellow dog when you found how the cards lay? What price religion, Sam, when the joker turned up?"

Hackett gouged at his horse and the animal snorted and plunged off down the street. Dane Marco watched as Hackett pulled up in front of the church, jumped down and went inside.

I SAT THERE for a full minute while Marco neither moved nor spoke. Then, he looked up at me as if he hadn't seen me before. He said, "Why are you riding with him, son? Where did he pick you up?"

"That's my business, mister," I told him, and rode on toward the church after Hackett. A few yards and Marco was calling after me. I pulled up and waited for him.

He came up beside my horse and said, "Last night after I met you by the desert house, did you follow me back to town? Did you ride behind me all the way in?"

I said I hadn't. I told him exactly what I'd done. He had no comment about the buckshot-slinging woman in the desert house, but he seemed to believe, and he went away frowning over some thought of his own.

After he went back into the saloon, I dismounted and led my horse toward the church.

I found Hackett inside, standing in a rude pine pulpit at the far end. In front of him were the empty benches, row on row, covered with sand and dust. There was sand on the window sills, and it had drifted in on the floor like snow.

Hackett's eyes were vacant, far away, as he took in the emptiness before him. "This was a holy place," he said. "A haven for my sheep and my lambs in a time and a place of evil. They came here and I taught them His word and led them in the path He told us of before they crucified him on Calvary."

Somehow, that kind of talk made me uncomfortable. I didn't know why, but I felt self-conscious and out of place listening to them. Maybe it was my mood. Anyhow, I went out of there and down the street to the saloon.

It was empty when I walked in, but after a minute Marco came from a back room with a scowl on his face. "What do you want?"

"What do most people want when

they come in a saloon? A drink."

I went over and leaned on the bar. He shrugged as I put a half-dollar down. Then, he came over behind the bar and pushed out a glass and a bottle. "Help yourself."

I poured a shot. "How about a beer chaser?"

"The wagon didn't come today."

I knocked off that shot and another one. I set the glass down and shoved the half-dollar toward him. "Take your money."

"It's on the house. The first customer of the day always drinks free. Have another."

"That's generous, but two's my limit."

I ROLLED the shot glass in my palm, and he leaned forward with his elbows on the bar. "You didn't answer my question," he said.

"What question?"

"The one I asked you out in the road. Where did you find him? Or where did he find you?"

"I think I did answer. I told you it was none of your business."

"Something to hide, eh?"

"Not necessarily. I found him down the line a piece. He was heading this way. He—he helped me out of a jam and I rode along with him."

"He's been away from here a long time. Did he tell you about that? Why he went away or why he came back?"

"He doesn't talk much. Neither of us are talkers. Very little was said."

Marco poured himself a drink. He put it in his mouth and rolled it around a little before he swallowed it. "I'd like to give you some advice, son."

"Go right ahead. I don't say I'll take it, but don't let that stop you."

"Get on your horse and ride out of here. That girl isn't for you, and there's nothing in a ghost town for anybody, let alone a kid with his whole life before him. Climb on and ride out."

He said the girl wasn't for me. I wondered about that. Was it just a long shot, or did my feelings for Jennifer stick out all over me? It didn't seem possible he could know I was in love with her.

"She's your daughter?"

He nodded. "I don't know whether you found it out or not, but she's blind. Leave her alone."

"There's more to it than that, isn't there?"

His eyes were dead on mine, as cold and hostile as those of the shotgun woman. "Yes, there's more to it than that. But nothing that's any concern of yours, except that the slugs won't miss next time. Ride on, son."

He was telling me, but he might as well have been talking to the wall. "You said there's nothing in a ghost town for anybody. Then why are you here? And why did Hackett come back?"

"That's our affair."

I took my elbows off the bar. "Thanks for the drinks," I said, "and I think I'll stick around a while. I don't believe you'd shoot me down in the street." I went to the door and looked back. He hadn't moved. "Or then again, maybe you would," I said, and went back to the church.

THERE WERE some living rooms behind the church and that's where Hackett and I holed up, and the whole thing had a touch of unreality about it. The handful of miners still working the gold hills nearby kept pretty much to themselves so far as I could see. Maybe they came to Marco's saloon for drinks, but not when I was around. So that left the three of us. Myself. Hackett, who would have been all alone in a crowd of ten thousand, squatting there in the place that had been a church. Marco, bitter and

cold-eyed, roosting behind his bar as though waiting for customers that never came. And both those men deeply involved in some stark tangle I couldn't begin to unravel.

And not casual, any of it. The whole thing had the smell and flavor of dynamite waiting to go off; waiting for a match to be put to the powder. A showdown of some kind in the making.

But I had my own business to attend to. I had an objective now—a reason for being.

Jennifer.

I didn't know whether she was a part of all this mystery or not. I only knew I had to get close to her and stay close, and I knew the way wasn't through her father or the woman with the shotgun. There was only one way. Direct.

Right away—that first night—I was back at the boulder as soon as darkness came down. She wasn't there, and while I waited I found out what real loneliness can be. The fear that she wouldn't come was one of the worst fears I'd ever known, and I got just about ready to go up and knock on the door again when I heard soft footsteps and knew she'd come.

It was pitch dark and I couldn't see what she was wearing, but I felt the tingle in my blood and realized how wonderful it was to be alive.

I called her name in a whisper and her hand was in mine. She caught her breath quickly and her voice was light. "Oh, it's you. I didn't expect anyone. I come out here every night after my aunt goes to sleep. It's gotten so I can walk straight to this big rock.

She spoke lightly, but I wasn't fooled. This thing inside me was so hot and real, I knew she had to feel it too. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Why...no. And I guess I should be too. But I'm not. Somehow, I'm so certain that you wouldn't...hurt me."

"Hurt you!" I was shaking all over, and I almost choked on the words. "I —I think you're wonderful."

She laughed softly. She brushed past me, and my outstretched hand slipped lightly across her breasts as she stepped toward the boulder. It was like an electric shock, but it scared me and I cursed myself for a clumsy fool. A thing like that could frighten her away.

I blurted, "It's pitch dark. I can't see an inch ahead." It wasn't quite true, but I hoped she'd believe it.

"The moon isn't out, then?"

"Not yet. In about an hour."

I DID NOTHING that night but sit and feel her close to me. I held her hand and told her a little about Texas. Maybe not the truth; maybe I colored it up. But with her near me, the whole world, including Texas, seemed like a glorious place.

After she went back to the house, I sat there for a while just feeling good. But on the way back to town, I was jerked up short; so short, that I reined up and just sat there full of the thought that came to me. Something she'd said. It came to me now as clearly as though she was saying it again: *Somehow, I'm so certain you wouldn't...hurt me.*

Casual enough, except for that accent on the *you*. It could only mean one thing, now that I thought about it. Someone had hurt her! The realization of this made me a little sick, a little crazy. It made me ready to kill again.

After a while, I rode on into LaClede. There was a light in the saloon, but the rooms in the church were dark. When I got inside, I could hear Hackett's heavy even breathing.

I went to bed and finally to sleep, thinking about Jennifer.

The next morning, I left town early and rode in a wide circle out through

the country. This was for no reason except for something to do; a way to kill time until darkness came.

A little after sundown, I was in the neighborhood of the desert house and darkness found me at the rock. I hadn't let myself think of the possibility that she wouldn't be there. Probably because I didn't want to think about going to the house and meeting the gun-toting Nora. I'd have done that if I'd had to.

Jennifer was there—waiting this time—and I realized how much had happened between us in two short nights that we both took for granted and said nothing about. When her hand found mine on this night, it was warm and eager. And her quick laugh wasn't as light as it had been before. A note of shyness was there.

Then I said it. I blurted it out and it must have sounded as though someone had me by the throat. "Jennifer, I'm not much—not much at all—but I love you."

All the time I'd been thinking of her as something very fragile—like a delicate vase or a teacup you could break at a touch. I found she wasn't like that. She was a woman, full of all the things that make a woman what she is.

She was in my arms, hot and hard and tight, and her lips were hunting for mine the way a person thirsty and in the dark would hunt for the mouth of a canteen. My hands felt her strong young back under the thinness of her dress, the clean slim muscles of her back just above where her hips were pressing against me.

And all I could think of was what if I hadn't found her; how tragic it would have been.

Then the first, wild flush of it was over. She was drawing away from me and she was crying. She sat down on the rock with her hands over her face. I sat down beside her and couldn't think of anything to say. I put my arm around her shoulders and let her cry.

The sobbing lessened and she said, "I knew it was wrong. I had no right to come here again. But when you touched me even that first time, I was hungry for you."

I held her close.

"But it's no good. It can't be. You mustn't come here again."

"I'll come here until you go away with me. But first there's something else, something you've got to tell me."

She waited, her breast heaving under my fingers. "You said the other night that I wouldn't hurt you. The way you said it told me something. You have been hurt, Jennifer, by some one—some man. Who did it?"

SHE WAITED a long time and I didn't think she was going to answer. Then, she spoke in a flat, hopeless voice that cut my heart: "A man named Tillstrom...hurt me...raped me."

"Have you got any idea where I can find this man Tillstrom?"

"No. I don't know where he is. They told me he went away."

Her crying had stopped and her voice—all her words—came out in that flat, hopeless, tone: "It doesn't matter, I guess. It's...well, that part of it anyhow—the bad part—is over."

"It isn't over. I'll find him sometime."

"But I—I don't want you to find him."

I laughed. "You mean you're afraid for me?"

"No. I'd never be afraid for you. You're so strong. No one could hurt you."

"Jennifer—"

"No! No! You don't understand and I can't tell you. You don't know how he hurt me—what he did to me—and I can't tell you about it!"

"You don't have to tell me. I know. I understand." I was raging inside—seeing red and trying to keep it down underneath where she wouldn't find it.

"You can't know it all; what came of it," she cried. "If you found him, it would just make things worse. *Worse* I tell you!"

I used my hands, trying to hold her and calm her down, but she slipped away from me and was only a dark shape standing on the path. "Oh, it's no use! Just forget about me and go away. Don't ever come back!"

She melted swiftly into the night, sure of her step in the darkness because she'd known only darkness for so long. She went away and I sat there alone.

But I had a little of what I had to know. Not much, but a little, and I was going to know more. I was going to know a hell of a lot more about what had gone on here in the desert.

As I rode back to town, I tortured myself with terrible soul-writhing thoughts and questions. How had it happened? When and how had this rotten thing called Tillstrom gotten his hands on Jennifer. Had it lasted hours or minutes? What kinds of torture had he thought up when he had her, naked, in his hands? What way could I think of to kill him that would even halfway pay off the score? I thought of all the ways I'd ever heard of that men had been killed. The Indians used to stake a man down on the ground over an anthill and watch the ants work on him. They would tie his wrists and ankles to four of their ponies and then ride off in four directions with the man in the middle.

When I got into town, my teeth were showing and I wasn't in a mood to stand any nonsense.

I WENT STRAIGHT to Marco's saloon and found him sitting at a round table fooling with a deck of cards. I said, "Where can I find a man named Tillstrom? You got any idea?"

His eyes came up to mine. I was close to him and lifted the gun out of his holster and stepped back before he had time to move a finger. The cards dribbled down out of his hands. Aside from that, he didn't move. He sat there with his face getting dark.

"What do you know about Tillstrom?" he asked.

"Never mind about that. Just answer my questions."

"Who the hell do you think you are, and who do you think you're talking to?" His voice was thick with rage.

"From what I can see, I'm talking to someone who hasn't much right to be a father. By that, I mean you, Marco! And I'm going to find out what you know about Tillstrom, the rat who raped your blind daughter! What were you doing while it was going on? Sitting here in your saloon playing solitaire?"

He came up from his chair straight at me. But he played it like a fool. He came with his arms arched and his hands hooked like claws and I hit between them square on the point of his chin. His head thumped against the floor. He lifted it and shook it and started to get up.

"Stay where you are," I said. "You're just wasting time. Get up and I'll knock you down again, and I don't want to knock you down. I want to talk."

He rubbed his jaw and came up to a sitting posture. Then, he got to his feet and dropped back into the chair. He said, "None of it is any concern of yours. Besides, it's all taken care of."

"It's plenty my concern. I've dealt myself a hand, because anything that concerns Jennifer concerns me. I'm

She was in my arms—and she was everything I ever wanted my woman to be

going to marry your daughter. In spite of you and all hell and high water, I'm going to marry her."

He threw back his head and laughed. Not as though he'd heard a joke, but with the same old bitterness. "You don't know what you're talking about. Regardless of what you think now or what your present ideas are, they'll change. Take my word for that and go on your way."

"You were lying when you said it was all taken care of. It isn't. Not by any means."

"Tillstrom is dead."

"I still say you're lying. If the affair is settled, then why were you hiding out by the desert house the other night? Why did you try to kill me? Who were you lying in wait for with your daughter as a decoy? Tell me that!"

He sat tight-lipped, staring at me, holding himself in.

"And why are you and Hackett sitting around here in a dead town? Both of you are waiting for someone or something. What?"

His grin was nothing more than the stretching of his lips. "Why don't you ask Hackett? He's your pal. You two are bosom friends. Why come to me when you've got a friend to go to for information?"

He had something there. Not much maybe, but it stopped me. It made me realize if I got anything out of Marco it would have to be with my fists, and maybe not even then. But I wasn't ready to use my fists on him. I threw his gun over behind the bar and went out of the saloon. I walked toward the church. Hackett. He was my man. The time had come. The game was my game now. Hackett was going to give out with something more than quotations from the Bible.

BUT NOT that night. Hackett was gone. He was nowhere in the church or around it. He kept our horses in the stable a hundred yards down the street. I went there and found his horse was gone. I went back to the church to wait. After waiting a long time, I went into the back rooms and tilted a chair against the door leading into the church, so the chair would fall over when the door was opened. Then, I went to sleep.

I woke up with the sun shining in through the broken window, but the chair was still where I'd put it. Hackett hadn't been back. I made myself some breakfast and washed it down with coffee still left in the pot from the day before. Then, I went down to the stable and got my horse.

I didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do; go out and hunt for Hackett, maybe. But half an hour later, I found I was on the way to the little meadow grass pocket where the desert house stood. I hadn't started that way intentionally. I guess my horse had gotten the habit.

I came toward it from the other side this time, and found the grass area was bigger than I'd known about. There was some broken country to the east with patches of poplar and willow and everything green. A small creek ran through it and then got lost, I guess, out in the sand and rock. I rode along this creek toward the house, and finally came to a place where I had to stop or show myself. I'd planned to ride up to the house, but I pulled up for a minute and sat looking it over.

I sat there for only a little while when a voice behind me said, "All right, boy. Sit still and don't move. Don't be reaching for a gun." It was a woman's voice. The shotgun lady, and I knew I was not going to jump out of the way this time. There was no place to jump.

"I haven't got a gun," I said. "I don't carry one."

There was a minute of silence while I waited, not daring to look around, just sitting there wondering when the buckshot would fly.

It didn't fly. The woman said, "Get down off your horse—on this side."

I did what she told me, very slowly and carefully, figuring it might give me a few more seconds of life. Once on the ground, I turned around with my hands in the air.

I didn't know where she'd come from, but she'd been pretty smart and quiet about doing it. She had her shotgun leveled at me and was standing beside the dim trail I'd just finished riding over. She wore a dark gray dress reaching clear to the ground so you couldn't see her shoes, and a sunbonnet pushed back off her dark, salt-and-pepper hair. Her mouth was a straight line, and her eyes hadn't changed any either.

She motioned with the gun after regarding me in silence for quite some time. "Sit there," she said. "There on that hummock. Back over to it and sit down facing me."

I DID IT just as she said to. It was awkward sitting there with my hands in the air, and I was glad when she told me to fold my arms tight across my chest. Then, she sat down too, in the grass about twenty yards away with the shotgun in her lap.

"What's your name, boy?"

I told her.

"What are you doing around here? Didn't I tell you to get out and never come back?"

"You told me that, but I didn't say I would."

"You came into the country with Sam Hackett, didn't you?"

"I rode with him for a spell."

The mouth didn't seem quite as hard and remorseless now, and I thought the eyes softened a little. I sat there waiting. It was her game and it was up to her to do the talking.

"I'm Jennifer's aunt," she said finally. "I'm Nora Marco."

I told her I was pleased to meet her, and I think she smiled just a trifle.

"You're on the prod for the girl, aren't you?"

"That's a way of saying it, I guess, but I'd put it different—not like they would in a bar-room. I'm in love with her. I want to marry her and take care of her. It looks to me like whoever's been taking care of her up to now hasn't done a very good job."

I don't know whether she liked what I said or not but she did think it over. "It's my fault," she said. "This feeling you've got for her."

"It isn't anybody's fault. Falling in love like I did just happens."

"It's my fault you got close enough to her to have it happen. These last two nights when you probably thought I was asleep, I wasn't. I was close by, listening to you. I knew what was going on."

"I can't figure that. The first night you tried to kill me."

"I changed my mind later. Maybe I liked the look of you, or maybe I just decided things can't go on this way for the girl. Anyhow, I had to find out about you. And I've still got a lot of finding out to do."

"There isn't much. I came up from Texas—"

She waved the shotgun impatiently. "I know all that. I heard it all in the dark by the boulder, and it didn't sound bad. I liked the way it sounded, and I guess that's what made me finally decide to take the bit in my teeth. You say you're in love with Jennifer?"

I must have reddened. "If you were listening by the rock, you must know that."

What she said next proved to me she was no hot-house plant; no lady-

in-the-parlor by any means: "Love is a word covering a lot of things. It can come from the heart or just from the pants. I don't know where yours comes from."

I sat there red as a beet. I suppose I should have gotten mad, but there was something about Nora Marco that awed me. "I guess you mean—"

"Don't be mealy-mouthed. You know damn well what I mean, and I'm going to make a deal with you."

"I'll listen but I won't say I'll agree."

She looked grimly down at the shotgun. "You're not in a position to hedge, boy. I claim you just think you're in love with Jennifer, and I've got a way we can both find out whether you are or not. I think you're a good clean kid, but you don't know what you're going up against, and I'm prepared to show you."

SHE GOT to her feet and had quite a time of it, what with her heavy skirts. I could have knocked the gun out of her hands a dozen times while she was doing this, but I didn't move. "So this is our agreement," she went on. "I'm going to show you something, and after you've seen it, we'll know what the score is. I want you to be fair with me. And don't be afraid. If you want to turn around and walk out of here then, I won't bother you or think the less of you. But if it's the other way, son, I'll help you all I can, for the girl's sake."

"That's fair enough," I said, "and I sure thank you, ma'am."

"Don't thank me yet," she said grimly. She turned and pointed over to the left. "We're going in that direction. You follow along behind me and be very quiet. Walk in my tracks and step when I do so there won't be the sound of four feet."

She started off with me behind her obeying orders. We went through the long grass like a couple of Indians stalking a scalp, but in broad daylight and in plain view we must have looked kind of silly.

As we approached a ridge, she turned and held her finger over her lips and then went forward on tiptoe. There was a ridge, thick with grass, up ahead. She went to the ridge and dropped to the ground, motioning. I crept up beside her and dropped down as she indicated. She pointed silently, and I raised my head and parted the grass to look over the ridge. Then I forgot everything but what I saw down there.

It was a little, grassy glade where the creek widened into a pool with a sod bank and willow trees to fend off the sun. Jennifer, in her gypsy skirt and white blouse, was sitting on the bank. She was laughing while her hands fondled a baby as brown as a nut lying on a blanket beside her. The baby cooed and got hold of her finger and pulled it down to its mouth. I sat there staring with all the world whirling in a circle around me. I don't know how long I sat there. Once I must have made a noise, because Jennifer raised her head, turning her clear, beautiful face toward us and called out, "Nora. Is that you?"

No one answered and Jennifer went back to playing with the baby. Then, I felt a hand on my shoulder drawing me back and we went away as we had come, with Nora Marco leading.

We got back to where my horse was standing, neither of us having said a word. When we got there, she turned around and faced me. "Well, what about it?" she said.

"What about what?"

"Don't hedge. You know what I mean."

"I'm used to having people say what they mean, ma'am. Can't see any reason why I should change now."

"All right! Are you still in love with

She was laughing as I watched, her fingers fondling the cooing baby lying beside her

Jennifer? She put the question direct.

I thought it over for a minute. I knew I had the old girl at the end of my rope, and it was kind of fun pulling her around. "Seems like before we went over and looked down at the pool, I told you I was in love with her."

"That was before you saw the baby."

"Ma'am, I knew some rat named Tillstrom had hurt Jennifer. I knew it because she told me herself. I thought you said you'd listened by the rock?"

"I did listen, but she didn't tell you about the baby."

She was still hanging onto the shotgun, and that bothered me. I stepped over and took it out of her hands. "Ma'am," I said, "I think I told you I was from Texas. But I guess you don't know much about Texas men."

HER MOUTH began to tremble, and I saw some tears in her eyes. I knew then she wasn't hard at all. The hardness was only a shell some women use to cover themselves up because underneath their hearts are so soft they need protection. Nora Marco was one of those. "You're lucky, boy. You're so damn lucky. That girl loves you."

"I had kind of hoped so. But seeing the baby does change things in a way. It—it leaves me not knowing what to do."

Her eyes widened and got a little steely again. "How so?"

"Well, I didn't know before there was a baby, and so killing the man who hurt Jennifer seemed the natural thing to do. The only thing. But now, I don't know. I can't figure. The baby's going to be mine along with Jennifer, if she'll have me. Can we build any happiness on knowing I killed the baby's father? When it grows up and can think for itself, wouldn't we always have to wonder if, someway, it would find out? Wouldn't the man's ghost live with us through the years?"

I guess my voice was working higher all the time, because at the end she put her hand over my mouth. At the end when I yelled, "I've got to kill that snake and yet I can't! I don't know what to do."

"Quiet boy! Not so loud. She'll hear you."

I said I was sorry, and then said, "Look, at least tell me about it. Tell me what happened. I've talked to your brother in his saloon at LaClede, and he won't tell me. I can't find Hackett. I waited for him all night. For God's sake, tell me what happened!"

"I'm not the one to do that, because I don't know the whole story myself; only a part of it. You see—before it happened—I used to bring Jennifer out here for a few days at a time. It's very quiet, and she liked it. I'd gone back to town that day for groceries, and while I was gone this man came to the house. Came and left again.

"I found Jennifer in bad shape when I got back—h y s t e r i c a l—but she wouldn't tell me what had happened. I took her to town and she wouldn't tell her father either—"

"Because she was ashamed?"

"I think she was afraid of her father. Dane is good-hearted, but he was always a rather stern parent. Not very close to Jennifer. Anyhow, she insisted on seeing the minister, Sam Hackett. Wouldn't talk to anyone but him. I'd brought her back here to the desert house and he came out to see her. I left them alone together, but she didn't give Hackett the whole story even then. Got hysterical and he had to go back to town with only the basic fact—a man had come here and attacked her.

"Hackett went thundering back to town and called his congregation to-

gether. He was a fire eater, that man! He built a pillory in front of the church and bought a blacksnake whip. He said when the man was discovered there would be a public whipping; that he himself would serve as the Lord's hand and exact bloody punishment."

"That seems like a silly thing to do," I said, "Make a big noise. He didn't know who the man was, and all the hullabaloo would certainly give him a chance to get away. Why didn't Hackett wait and nab him?"

NORA MARCO shook her head. "I don't know. But the next day, Hackett and Dane came out here together and talked with Jennifer again. She named the man this time—Duke Tillstrom, a cocky gambler who operated a lone hand in LaClede. They went to town after him—my brother and Hackett—and they brought him out here to confront Jennifer."

"He was still in town when they got there?"

"He hadn't gone any place. They found him playing poker in Dane's saloon."

"What happened when they brought him out here?"

Nora Marco frowned. Her dark eyes clouded. "I don't know. I never found out. As soon as they got here, Dane sent me back to town. I know something terrible must have happened because Dane came back to LaClede alone—alone, that is, except for Jennifer. He told me it was all over—settled—that Tillstrom was dead and buried out here in the desert. He said I was never to think of it or speak of it again. He wanted Jennifer to forget.

"Later, I saw the grave of Tillstrom. It's out there among the rocks. And that's—that's all I know, son, except Dane was a changed man from then on. Sour, morose, bitter."

"I guess he'd have reason to be. Have you and Jennifer lived here ever since?"

Nora Marco nodded.

"Why? Because Jennifer wanted it? Or her father?"

"Dane—m o s t l y. I think he's ashamed of the baby and wants it to stay hidden."

"Hidden away from who? With LaClede nothing but a ghost town, who's around to see the baby?"

Nora Marco shook her head again, and there was a weariness in her manner. "I don't know that. I'm just sure it's not good for Nora. That's why you're my great hope, son." The woman came close to me and laid a hand on my arm. I felt sorry for her. She said, "If you love her, take her away —away from all this—back to Texas!"

I wasn't through yet. "So Dane Marco told you it was all over?"

"Yes."

I knew it was a lie. Not her lie. His. I knew he'd lain in wait out here through the days and the weeks and the months, ready to use a rifle on somebody. On who? If Tillstrom was dead and in his grave, who was left to use a rifle on?

"One more thing," I said. "I've heard the name of Matthew Hackett mentioned."

"Matthew? He was Sam Hackett's son."

"What do you mean *was* Sam Hackett's son?"

"He disappeared, too—that last day here at the desert house."

"You mean he came out here that day with Marco and Tillstrom and Sam Hackett?"

"Yes. I guess I forgot to mention him. He wasn't important, except he helped bring Tillstrom here. It was Matthew, I think, who threw a gun down on Tillstrom and disarmed him."

"There's something might interest

you," I said. "When Sam Hackett and I first rode in here, he showed me a grave out there in the rocks and told me his son Matthew was in it. He said his son had died defending a woman's honor."

This kind of rocked Nora Marco back on her heels. She stared at me almost open-mouthed. She finally said, "That's something new. I don't understand it."

"I don't either. Do you suppose there are two graves out there?"

"I only know of one." She passed a hand over her forehead, and I could see she was very tired. When she spoke again, her voice was pleading. "But whatever happened, it's all over, son. All over. And the only important thing left is Jennifer. Go over and talk to her now. From here on out, it's up to you. I've helped you all I can."

I took her hand. "You've helped me a lot, and I sure thank you for it. Just one thing more. Will you go to Texas with Jennifer and me? The ranch down there isn't much, but I'll make it into a home for all of us."

Nora Marco smiled, and I think she was a little happier than she had been. "You're riding the horse hind end to, son. Isn't it a custom to ask the girl first?"

I SAID that was right, and left her there and walked toward the creek. The baby was asleep there in the grass, and Jennifer was lying beside it with her eyes closed. I walked softly, but she heard me and opened her eyes and sat up. She said, "Nora? Nora, is that you?"

"It's me, Jennifer. Spence Tolliver. I've come to see you."

She gave a little cry and reached out for the baby, a little as though I'd come to take it away from her, and I tried to think of something to say that would get that look off her face.

I said, "What have we got here, darling? A boy or a girl baby?" I put an accent on the *we* and tried to keep my voice light.

I'm not going to tell much about this; about what we did and said. I figure it's only my business and Jennifer's. As a matter of fact, I don't remember much of it except how I tried to tell her I figured myself pretty lucky to get a wife and a baby in one package. And I remember she was asking me more about Texas, when I finally steered her back to that awful night at the desert house. Maybe that was cruel, and if it had been all over and done with I wouldn't have said a word; I'd have just tried to forget it. But it wasn't over, and I had to know.

Things weren't so bad, really—questioning her—because now she trusted me and wanted to do anything I asked of her, even to reliving the past.

"It was after Nora had gone to town for supplies," she said. "This man came to the desert house. He asked me if I was alone and I told him I was. Then, he took me by the arms and we struggled. He laughed and told me it wasn't any use. 'Duke Tillstrom,' he said, 'always gets what he wants.'

"I fought as long as I could—"

"You don't have to talk about that," I told her. "Let's jump over to the time your father and Sam Hackett brought Tillstrom back here. What happened then?"

"They came into the house and father sent Nora away, back to town, I guess. Then, father took my hand and said, 'Jennifer, we're going to make Tillstrom talk to you. I want you to listen to his voice and accuse him of his crime. That's all you have to do.'

"Then, I heard a voice and I said, 'That's the man,' just as everything began going black around me. I heard

what I thought was a gun shot and men roaring in loud voices, but they seemed to come from far away. After that, I fainted."

She seemed tired and upset after telling me this, and I didn't want her to talk any more. I kissed her and then took her back to the house. I carried the baby, a little girl with blue eyes, and Jennifer walked with her hand on my arm. The baby wriggled and laughed in my face. It was the first time I'd carried one, and as I looked down at her I thought of how good can come out of evil and violence. I thought of something else, too. Out of all the hard years and the wandering up and down the country, I'd come out a lucky guy. I had myself a family, and Texas and the ranch down there looked mighty good.

BUT THERE were some things to be done first. I couldn't go away without knowing. I had to find out what happened in the desert house that day. Sam Hackett was going to tell me. Either Hackett or Marco.

There was something I could find out for myself, though, with a little work. That grave out there. Marco said Tillstrom was in it, and Hackett claimed it held the bones of his son who had died honorably. I decided to find out.

I got a shovel at the desert house and pushed on out to the rocky country. I found the grave. I threw my hat on the ground and went to work. It took a while, over an hour, before my shovel hit something soft. I scraped the dirt away and had a look-see.

Of course, I'd never seen either Tillstrom or Matthew Hackett, but I had something to go on. Tillstrom was a gambler and Hackett was young—around my age—and he'd looked something like me.

It had been a long time, as bodies go, and I couldn't tell much what the corpse I found had looked like. But there were other things to go by. The clothing. It had mildewed and rotted, but the form was still there. The corpse wore black boots and black gambler's clothing. There was a heavy gold watch chain across the chest, and a big diamond on one of the fingers. It was the body of a gambler, all right.

The body of Tillstrom.

This kind of knocked out a theory I'd been forming in my mind as to what had really happened. I had really expected to find Matthew Hackett in that grave. I'd kind of figured that when Tillstrom had been accused he'd gotten the drop on the other three and killed young Matthew and escaped. That was the base I'd built my reconstructed picture on, but it seemed I was all wrong.

I covered the body up again and went back to the desert house. Jennifer and the baby were asleep. Nora was in the yard knitting under a willow tree. It was a peaceful, homey scene—one I was going to transplant to Texas.

"I think you better bring Jennifer and the baby into town, when you get ready," I told Nora. "I'm going on ahead to have a showdown with Sam Hackett, if he's back, or maybe with your brother. After that, there'll be no use of coming back here. In La-Clede, there are a couple of old wagons. We'll fix one of them up and head out of this country."

She didn't try to talk me out of it. It seemed she was almost glad to have somebody to take orders from. I started away and then remembered something. "And keep that shotgun of yours handy. I can't get the idea out of my head that somebody's prowling around in the ridges. Somebody who would maybe like to get at Jennifer again." After that, I rode to town fast, not sparing my horse any.

Hackett was back. His horse was in front of the church. I reined mine up beside it and walked toward the door. I'd had plenty of surprises for one day—enough, I thought—and it didn't seem as though I should have another. But there was a new one waiting for me.

I WALKED in the front door of the church, sand grating under my boots, and just then, the door to the rear, beside the pulpit, opened and Sam Hackett came through. He shut the door after him and came a few steps forward with his eyes on me. I kept on walking toward the rear and, as I got closer, I saw he was different. There'd always been an odd look about Sam Hackett, that grimness and iron-hardness you always see in a religious fanatic. But now it was increased, deepened. He looked at me as though he'd never seen me before.

But I wasn't just a curious observer now. I'd been dealt into the game. My stakes were up and that made a difference. I said, "You and I have got to talk, Hackett. I've got some questions to ask, and by God you're going to answer. Let's go into the back rooms."

I stepped toward the door and just touched the knob when he let out a roar. "Stay away from that room! Stay out of it, I say! Get your hand off that knob." He dived forward and swung one of his big arms. I went over like a cattail in the wind and my shoulders banged against the floor ten feet away. He stood there with his fists doubled and, for the first time, I saw fear in his big face.

I was no match for Hackett in any way I could figger. I got up very slowly and said, "All right. We'll go over to Marco's saloon. I'd like to have him in on it, anyhow."

He didn't object to that. He was eager to get me away from the church, and I thought I knew why. We went to Marco's bar and found him just in the act of pouring a shot of booze down his throat. He wiped his mustache and waited without speaking.

I said, "This is a showdown, Marco."

"A showdown for who?"

"All of us. I'm in the game now myself. First of all, I'm going to marry Jennifer. I've got your sister Nora's blessing, and I'd like to have yours. But I'm marrying her whether I get it or not."

I'd expected him to blow up, but he didn't. He picked up the liquor bottle and looked at it for a minute before he poured himself another drink. He downed it and then pushed the bottle toward me. "You don't know what you're biting off, boy."

"I know more than you think, and before we're through here I'm going to know it all. First, Hackett here is lying about the party in the grave out there by the desert house." I pushed the bottle away and turned to Hackett. "You said your son was buried there. It isn't true. The dead man is Tillstrom."

He took the news in silence, but he shuddered like a grizzly bear hit with a club. There was suffering in the man. I braced my elbows against the bar and kept my eyes on his face. "I'm not saying you lied intentionally. I think I know you pretty well by this time—know what happened to you—and I think you really believed that when you said it. But you know different now, don't you?"

He'd dropped into a chair, his big frame hanging loosely.

MARCO WASN'T saying anything. He stayed behind his cold hard face, waiting. He wasn't offering any information. I wondered if

he'd give it out when I asked him. I decided it was time to find out.

"Let's get a few facts out into the open," I said. "There's only one thing I'm sure of and it's this: The voice Jennifer identified as belonging to the man who attacked her wasn't that of Duke Tolliver. It was Matthew Hackett's. Isn't that right?"

I didn't speak to either of them directly, but it was Marco who nodded. "Right. The rotten sneaking son of this self-righteous sky pilot here."

"And exactly what happened immediately after?"

Marco said, "Ask him. He knows. He was there."

"He was there," I said, "but I don't think he knows. You tell it, Marco."

"Not much happened," he replied, biting off his words. "I just killed the wrong man, that was all. I had my gun trained on Duke Tillstrom. It was cocked and it has a hair trigger. It went off and Duke fell dead, shot through the heart."

"And Hackett got a clip on the head. Is that right?"

"He took a step toward Matthew, and the kid hauled off and clumped him along-side of the head with the revolver he was carrying. Sam went down like a poled ox, and the kid lit out of the house. He made a horse and got away. I took one shot at him, but I missed."

"And ever since you've been camping around waiting for Matthew to come back."

"He'll come back, all right. I think he's hanging around out in the ridges now. I'll swear he followed me back to town the other night. I'll get him, don't worry."

"So there you were with Tillstrom dead and Hackett knocked out. What did you do?"

"The first thing that came to my mind. I took Duke out and buried him, and when I got back to the house Hackett was gone. He'd sneaked away just like his rotten son. Two of a kind, that pair. Neither of them could face the music."

"That isn't quite true, Marco," I said. "You're doing Hackett an injustice thinking so. That whack he got knocked something out of his head. That, and maybe the shock of finding out what a rat his son was. Anyhow, he went away from the desert house without any memory of what had happened. I know that because I found him way down in Kansas, leading a different kind of life entirely. It wasn't until a slug creased his skull that he remembered who he was."

"Am I supposed to believe that?" Marco sneered.

"I don't care whether you believe it or not. But let's talk about Tillstrom. Wasn't there any inquiry here in town when he didn't show up?"

"A little talk, but that was all. The sheriff asked me about Duke, but he was my man, the sheriff." Marco looked at Hackett and smiled without mirth. "He can tell you that. He found out who owned the law around when he tried to close me up."

"And then things got tough in LaClede?"

"Plenty tough. People began drifting away, and no one cared a damn what happened to Duke. He was forgotten."

"Did you ever plan to confess killing him?"

"Confess to who? Those five or six batty miners digging in the wornout shafts?"

"So you stayed here for just one reason: To get Matthew when he came back? What made you think he'd come back?"

MARCO SEEMED to suddenly wake up now. "You're asking

an all-fired lot of questions for a young squirt. You figure you got elected sheriff or something?"

"If I was sheriff, nobody would own me, Marco."

I turned to Hackett. "I feel sorry for you, mister, because I think I've got you figured out."

He looked at me through dead eyes and remained silent.

"It was the two things coming at once that knocked you kicking. The blow on the head and the knowledge that your son—the only person you have in the world—was a rat and did a horrible thing. Some strange things go on in people's heads. I think that even when you were knocked back to normal, down in Kansas, your mind refused to accept the fact of your son's rottenness. So it told you a lie. It told you he was a hero instead of a skunk, and gave you a set of phoney facts by distorting the memory picture of what really happened at the desert house during those few seconds before you were knocked out.

"As I see it, you must have come to pretty quick after the blow, because you knew about the grave. So you must have followed Marco when he took Tillstrom's body out and buried it. Otherwise, you couldn't have known about it. Then, you must have wandered away. How you got to Kansas, I don't know, or how you started leading the other life."

"The...other life?" His face and his whole manner were asking.

"Never mind that. The important thing is, Hackett, you've come to the crossroads. For the last two or three days, you've begun to realize the truth. You're too honest to go on believing a lie that even your own mind tells you. You've been realizing the truth about Matthew, and you've been going through hell because you can't make yourself face it."

He was going through hell. "What —what can a man do? A man's only flesh and blood. He can take so much."

"I think there's but one thing you can do. Be true to yourself and your beliefs. It's the only thing that will save you. Respect your own integrity. All your life you've fought evil. You can't start living with it now."

"What—what do you mean?"

"When you heard about what happened to Jennifer, you built a pillory in front of your church. Your course was clear to you then. It's got to be clear to you now."

I glanced over to where Marco was straightening up slowly, as though he were beginning to catch on.

I said, "You've got to punish your son for what he did, Sam Hackett. You've got to do it for your own sake. It's the only way."

HACKETT WAS clenching and unclenching his great hands. I said, "You've got to drag him out of that back room where you're hiding him and mete out your pillory justice."

Both men stiffened. Hackett said, "You know he's there?"

"He is, isn't he?"

Hackett sagged. "I found him skulking around out in the desert. I talked to him, but it didn't do any good. So I brought him here."

"Why?"

"I don't know exactly. To keep him from going where he wanted to go. To protect him from Marco. Or just because I wanted him near me. He's my son! He's my son! No one's going to kill him!"

Marco had his gun in his hand. There was a strange, thick look in his face as he took a step forward.

But he didn't have a chance this time either, because I knew a few tricks and I'd thought this showdown out ahead of time. I'd seen to it I

was close enough to him to be effective, and it isn't hard to take a gun away from a man when he doesn't expect it and hasn't got it pointed at you.

So, in a few seconds I had the gun and Marco was rubbing his wrist. "You don't want to kill Matthew," I told him. "You just think you do. Killing isn't the answer after all that's developed from this affair. Some day, you're going to have to look your grandchild in the eye, and you won't want blood on your hands when you do it. But you want to see Matthew punished, and you're going to."

I was a little surprised at hitting it so close. I'd expected trouble from Marco, even to the point of tying him up and rolling him behind his own bar. But there wasn't any. He'd evidently been thinking about the baby more than I realized. He stood there and said nothing.

I said, "All right, Hackett. This is it. You do it or, by God, I will!"

He got to his feet and I saw something in his face; something like relief; like a trapped man who suddenly finds a way out of prison. He got to his feet slowly, but then he straightened himself up to his full height and walked out of the saloon.

Marco and I followed him to the church and stood by the pillory while he went inside. Everything was quiet. No commotion from beyond the door. A few minutes passed, then we heard a yell, a high shrieking voice and a string of curses, and Sam Hackett came through the door carrying his son under one arm. In his other hand he had a blacksnake whip.

MATTHEW HACKETT was about my height but a little slimmer. I couldn't tell much about his face. It was twisted in fear and rage, while pleadings and curses poured from his throat. He wasn't a weakling by any means, but his father carried him under one arm as though he were a sack of salt.

He put Matthew's neck and arms into the stocks and fastened the rusty lock at one end. He took hold of the boy's shirt collar and ripped his shirt down to his belt like a piece of tissue paper.

What followed wasn't pretty, but I told you in the beginning there wasn't much sweetness and light to this affair. Hackett's blacksnake came around and cracked like a gun as it cut a red mark across Matthew's back. And the first blow was comparatively feeble to the ones that followed. As Hackett swung that whip again and again, bringing scream after scream, he personified outraged justice itself—society exacting its toll to the last iota of retribution.

And maybe there was more to it. It flashed through my mind that Hackett was a fanatic at heart, and I think all fanatics are sadists, who live in hatred of other people's sins and in fear of their own. Maybe Hackett wasn't beating his son. Maybe he was punishing himself—flaying out atonement for his own sins by cutting the back of his son.

At any rate, I had to step in and stop it or he would have killed Matthew. I clung to his great arm, and for a while I sailed through the air along with the whip. But, finally, the big man quieted down. He dropped the whip and sank down to his knees with his head bent, and I knew he was praying.

I opened the stock and let Matthew slip, sobbing, to the ground. Then, I picked up the remnants of his shirt and bound them over his cuts.

At that moment, I glanced eastward and there, coming over the desert along the trail toward town were two horses; two little specks far away, but I knew it was Nora and Jennifer

and the baby. Then, I thought of something and grinned inside me. I didn't even know the baby's name.

I stood there watching them come closer, and it must have been a strange sight—the four of us there in the street of the ghost town. Hackett on his knees—Marco sitting on the church porch slowly rubbing his hand back and forth across his chin—Matthew on the ground—me standing there waiting, straining my eyes into the desert.

Then, I realized Matthew was no longer on the ground. He'd gotten up and climbed on the horse by the hitching rack close by. If I'd noticed —had been paying attention—I don't think I'd have objected. But then—when he'd swung the horse around and pointed it south, Matthew let out a curse and bent over his right leg.

I SAW the knife come out of nowhere. I stood frozen, during the split second Matthew brought it up and then down in a lightning arc.The knife flew through the air, straight and true, and into Sam Hackett's back, burying itself to the hilt.

Even as Sam arced backward from the pain, his son was off and away from there, bent over the saddle, streaking northward.

Marco's gun had been stuck in my belt. I jerked it out and threw two shots after the murderer, but they missed. Then, Marco had jerked the gun out of my hand and was running after him firing. After a while, he stopped. It had done no good. Matthew was gone.

I knew what remorse and inner pain was myself now. I'd arranged all this. It had been my show, and it had ended in tragedy. I felt it even keener when Marco came back and stood looking down at me where I was kneeling beside Hackett.

Marco said, "How do you like playing God, boy? Lots of fun, eh?" His words were full of bitterness, and then he turned and went to his saloon.

Hackett lay on his back. I'd pulled the knife out and I had my arm under his shoulder, my hand between the wound and the dust of the street. Blood pumped into my hand.

He opened his eyes and smiled at me and must have read my face because he said, "It's all right, boy. All right. God's will is always manifest in the end."

"I'm sorry." That was all I could think of to say.

He had something on his mind and had to get it off. When he spoke, each word was a struggle. Marco had come back with a bottle of whiskey. Hackett waved it away and Marco stood there looking down.

"There—are pictures—in my mind and—dreams, boy—about where I was," Hackett gasped. "Evil things that happened—in Kansas. They make me afraid. What—did I do in Kansas—son?"

"You were a good man," I said. "You did the same as in Monana. You went around helping people. Saving their souls."

His face lighted. "I did?"

"Sure you did. They'll always remember you in Kansas. Those bad pictures in your mind are the things you fought against; the things you've spent your life fighting against."

"Then, maybe... He'll receive me as one of His Children. You think so?"

And now he was like a child—a child yearning for home. "Sure He will. He'll have a lot of angels waiting at the gate."

"I want to be buried on a hill," he whispered. "On—Calvery."

Then, he died.

WE BURIED him the way I told you, and then I spent a couple of days taking the pieces of several old wagons in order to make one good one.

On the second day, Marco rode up beside me. There was a gun on his hip and a rifle in the boot. He was ready for the trail. He gave me a smile. The first time I'd ever seen a smile on his face. He said, "I'll see you in Texas sometime, son. In the meantime, take care of her and the baby."

I grinned. "Nora will see to that."

"Don't let her run you—Nora, I mean."

"When will we see you?"

"Don't quite know."

"You're going after him, then?"

"That's right. Any objections?"

"None at all. From now on, I'm minding my own business. I'm through playing God."

He rode away, turned around once and waved, and then he was gone.

We traveled mostly at night. Slow at first, until we hit a town where I could buy some new harness. The set I put together in LaClede wasn't so good. At night, it was cool and pleasant riding along under the stars.

Then, one night—a night I'll never forget—Jennifer called me back to the wagon from where I was riding up ahead. She was sitting in the back end of the wagon with Nora on the seat driving. Jennifer's hands were trembling when I felt them in mine. She drew me close, and her whole body was trembling.

She said, "Darling—oh, darling! For just a second—a split second—I saw it. I know I saw it. The moon, sweetheart! The moon! Blurry, but big and round and yellow. Oh—hold me! Hold me tight!"

I held her tight, and realized what a lucky guy I was.

THE END

A TALE OF RAWHIDE

By Carter T. Wainwright

RAWHIDE WAS an important ingredient of life in the old Southwest. It had conspicuous qualities of durability and toughness, but users had to remember that the stuff when wet was flexible and had great stretching powers, while it contracted as it dried and became stiff as wood.

To illustrate these peculiarities, cowboys had a favorite story. It was one of those tales told over and over in campfire sessions, each teller having his own particular version.

It might go something like this: One hot summer day, a rancher hitched a horse, with rawhide traces, to the sled he used to haul barrels of water up from the creek. The creek was about half a mile away. Just as he got the barrel filled and had started back to the house, a sudden heavy rain began to fall. The man plodded along behind the horse, head ducked down against the driving rain. He had just arrived at the kitchen door when the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and the sun came out brighter and hotter than before.

The rancher stopped the horse, and turned to get his barrel of water. It wasn't there, and neither was the sled. All there was behind that horse were a couple of thin, stretched-out rawhide traces extending down the trail toward the creek. The man was not concerned by this discovery. He unhitched the horse, taking the precaution of fastening the ends of the traces over a convenient stump near the house. Then he sat down to rest, and to wait.

The wet earth steamed as the sun scorched down. The heat was having an equally dependable effect upon the rain-soaked traces. As they dried, they contracted. Soon, the rancher saw the sled with the barrel on it come sliding slowly up the road. Closer and closer it crawled, until it finally stopped a short distance from the stump. By that time, the rawhide traces were firm and hard, and once more fully dry.

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The Case of the TIN-EARED STOOL PIGEON

THERE ARE two cases that I'd like to tell you about this month. Neither of them were of earth-shaking proportions, but each of them illustrates a point of interest. The moral pointed out in the first case, I think, is that if fate is ready to lower the beam on a criminal and there is no routine method handy, then fate will dream one up. In the case I'm about to relate, that method was a honey.

In 1903, I had been a member of the St. Louis police force for some years, and had managed to tap the grapevine in several places. By this, I mean that I had quite a number of information sources in the underworld.

There may be several ways of building up a stable of stool pigeons, but I knew of only one, and I used it industriously. This consisted of a certain restraint so far as arrests were concerned.

To illustrate, there was a character around named Nick Lait whom I could have thrown in jail for several offenses of a petty nature. By petty, I mean possible convictions he could have drawn rating anywhere from thirty days to six months in the workhouse. Possibly I was derelict in allowing him to roam the streets, but he knew his way around the underworld and, as a result of holding possible arrest over his head, I was able, over a period of time, to make pinches totaling more than one hundred years of servitude upon information Lait handed me.

I thought then, and still feel that way, that that was good business. By allowing a small-time crook his freedom, I put some pretty dangerous men behind bars.

It was quite late one night in early summer, when Nick intercepted me near my home with a bit of rather vague information. "There's a guy you might be interested in," he said.

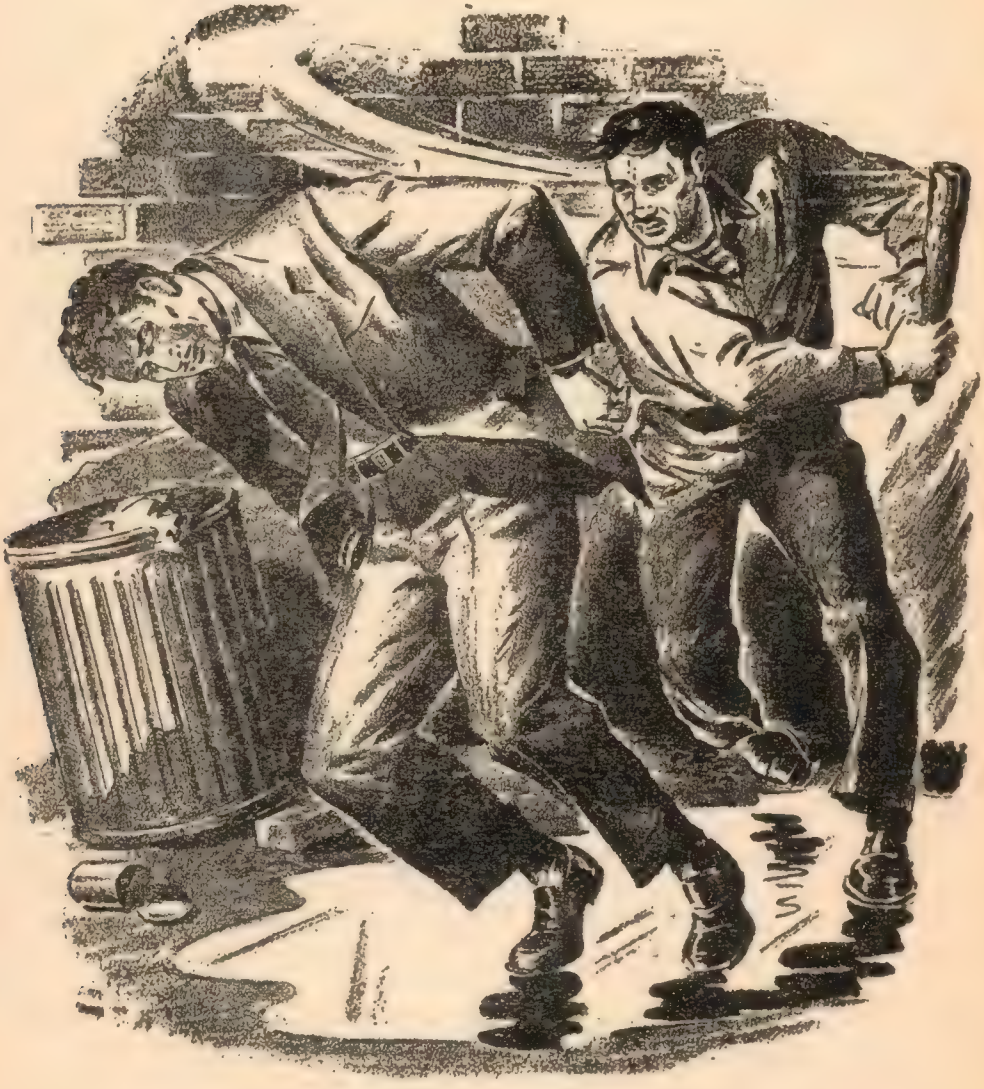
"What's his name"

"I don't know. It happened kind of funny, but this mug's been floating bad paper. You'll probably be getting a beef in a day or two."

John Sheridan

As told to Paul W. Fairman

The WEST'S GREATEST DETECTIVE



He swung the club blindly, and killed his abuser with one well-aimed blow

Versed in the cryptic lingo of these shadowy boys, I knew exactly what Nick meant. The man to whom he referred had cashed some bad checks. In a day or two, when they failed to clear, the cashee would make a complaint to the police.

"As I said, it happened kind of funny. You know Sam Clark's saloon on Chestnut Street?"

I told him that I did.

"Well, I was pulling on a beer in there this afternoon when this guy comes in. He's about five feet six inches, black hair, and a knife scar on his right jaw. Dressed fit to kill. Looked a little like a race-track tout.

"Anyway, he comes in, see? He bellies up to the bar, and Sam Clark knew him because he reached over and give him the mit. The guy orders whiskey and they chew back and forth a little and I don't catch what they say because I'm not listening much."

I'd had a hard day and I wasn't appreciating Nick's buildup. "Come on," I growled. "Give it to me."

"Take it easy. I'm getting to it. Then I hear Sam say, 'By the way—where'd you get those phoney checks passed?' Just like that he asked it. The guy says something back in a low voice I couldn't catch, but right away I look him over. He goes out after while and I figure to ask Sam who he was, but I didn't want to get nosey, so I let it lay."

"Sam was probably kidding him."

Nick shook his head. "Nope. I'm steering you right. You know I ain't a web-foot, Shevlin. You know that."

In today's jargon, Nick would have said, "You know I'm not a dope."

AND IT was true. Nick had never given any unreliable information, and I'd grown to trust him. Another point lending authenticity to his tip was Sam Clark's reputation. If any saloon owner in St. Louis fraternized with bad paper men and worse, it was Sam Clark.

I gave Nick Lait a couple of dollars and went on home to supper and bed, filing the tip away for future use.

The next morning, I checked Complaints. There was no record of any current bad check passing. I was busy with other work and was called out of town for a couple of days. That made it the fourth day after receipt of Nick's information that I wandered in and found two apparently unrelated complaints on the docket. A grocer located about five blocks from Clark's saloon was holding a check marked No Account by a bank in St. Joseph, Missouri—the town, oddly enough, made famous by Jesse James. The amount was one hundred and twenty dollars. The second victim was a druggist on the other side of town. He'd been taken for eighty dollars, and all he had to show for it was a draft, stamped Fraudulent, by a Cairo, Illinois bank.

On the following day, I inquired and found that Detective Healy of the Bunco Squad had been handed both details. I contacted Healy that morning. "What's the setup on those check-passing capers you're on, Jack?"

Healy, built like a small bull, was one of the best-natured policemen I ever knew. He could grin at the drop of a hat. "What's the matter? The guys friends of yours?"

"No, but I thought I might be able to give you a lead. Were they both pulled by the same man?"

Healy shook his head. "Not according to the descriptions. As a matter of fact, one was a dame. Brunette about thirty, well dressed. She bought twenty dollars worth of groceries and left them in a restaurant down the block."

"And maybe the other was around five and a half feet with a knife scar on his right cheek?"

Again Healy indicated the negative. "Man about sixty. Dignified, with white hair. Looked like a bank president."

"Got a line on either of them yet?"

"No," Healy replied cheerfully. "But the man's been tagged before. I've got his description out. We'll maybe pick him off on his next try."

I wished him luck and turned away, but he was right after me. "You said you had a lead. What's this about a mug with a knife scar?"

I WASN'T too eager to go into it, as things had developed. The way it stood, my information wouldn't have been of any value and, so long as it wasn't necessary, I didn't care to reveal my source even to another policeman. It was an accepted, though unwritten rule, that every officer guarded his stool pigeons as much as possible.

"Just a hunch I had," I told Healy, "If there are any new complaints, let me know."

And that was how it stood two days later when Healy buttonholed me again. "Look, John. The other day you were saying something about a five and a half footer with a scar on his face. Remember?"

"I remember."

Healy dug into his pocket. He drew out a sheet of paper and unfolded it. "Here's a reader that came in this morning. I looked through the pile and found it. This isn't your man, is it?"

The reader was out of Kansas City. It gave a full face and right profile of a man named William Deacon, alias Will Duke, alias Wesley Damson, alias three other names. He was twenty-six years old and could be identified by his black hair and a clearly marked knife scar from the right ear lobe to the point of his chin. He habitually wore flashy clothes, went armed, and was considered dangerous.

He was badly wanted for a murder in Kansas City.

I folded the reader and put it into my pocket. "I'll check and let you know," I said. "I got the information second hand."

Healy was somewhat disappointed. "All right, John, but don't forget to come back. Just between you and me, that'd be a good pinch."

I knew exactly what he meant. Neither of us was detailed to Homicide at the time, but if we went out and brought in a killer in the course of duty, it wouldn't hurt our records a bit. I gave him back his grin and said, "I won't forget."

I had a method of getting in touch with Nick Lait which is not of enough importance to describe herein. Some four hours later, I made contact. In the meantime, I had carefully torn the double picture out of the reader. I showed the picture to Nick. "Is this the check passer from Clark's saloon?"

Lait nodded almost instantly. "Sure. That's him." Then, a marked fear was in Nick's face. "You ain't going to make me appear?"

I shook my head. "No. I want to be sure you're covered. In case I talk to Sam Clark, is there reason he should tie you into it?"

Lait thought it over and then shook his head. "There was ten—maybe twelve guys in the joint at the time."

"All right," I replied. "Clark himself may land behind bars before this is over."

I BUZZED Healy and from that point on, we worked together. A little discussion revealed what seemed

to be the best plan. Feeling that we could spot our man, we took turns staking out Clark's saloon from a restaurant across the street. In all, we put in about twenty-four hours of active duty. With no result.

With valuable time passing, we switched over to the direct approach. We entered Clark's saloon and staged a direct interview.

Clark was the picture of innocence as we began. I showed him the photo of William Deacon. "We're looking for this friend of yours, Sam. We want him and we want him bad, and no funny business out of you. Get it?"

Clark studied the photo, and the perplexity on his face seemed genuine enough. He laid the picture down. "What makes you think I know this monkey? How come you coppers peg me? I'm not hiding anybody out!"

"I said no funny business! This man has been in your saloon at least once. You knew him well enough to talk with him. You'd better look again."

This, Clark speedily did, his brows furrowed into a scowl. After at least sixty seconds of intense study, the wrinkles cleared away. "Sure! Oh, sure! He's been in here off and on the past month. That's the guy. I don't know who the hell he is though, or where he lives."

I was just getting ready to apply pressure, when Clark, filled suddenly with the spirit of cooperation, raised a hand and yelled to a colored lad who was sweeping the floor in the rear of the saloon: "Hey, Billy! Come here a minute."

When Billy arrived, Clark handed him the picture. "You know this guy?"

Billy was far more alert than Clark had been. "Yes, sir. That's a fellow comes in here."

"Know where he lives?"

"He did live in Mrs. Prentice's boarding house down the block. I delivered a bottle whisky there one night. Ain't seen him lately, though."

I interposed a question: "What name did he give you?"

"Deacon, mister, just plain Deacon. I don't know whether it was the first or the last name."

That, of course, was all we needed. Healy and I went directly to Mrs. Prentice's boarding house and found our man in his underwear sound asleep on his bed. We also found three hand guns in the room, and quite a sum of money that was later traced to his Kansas City robbery-murder. About a year later, Deacon was hanged.

THUS, HEALY and I made a good pinch, somewhat to the disgruntlement of the Homicide squad, and it so happened I was never called upon to reveal my source of information.

But I was still puzzled, and shortly after the arrest of Deacon, I made another call on Sam Clark. Convinced that Sam was sincere in his professed lack of knowledge concerning Deacon, I put it to the saloon keeper squarely.

"Sam, it was brought to my attention that Deacon came in here not long ago—I can't give you the exact day—and you talked with him about passing bad checks. Somehow, it doesn't add up. What about it?"

Again, Sam Clark was surprised. "Bad checks? For Lord's sake, Shevlin! I only knew the guy to say hello to when he come in—just like I would to any customer! I didn't have no talk with him about anything but maybe who won the last race or something!"

I couldn't figure it out. Knowing my stool pigeon as I did, I was sure he hadn't dreamed up the episode. "As I remember it, your exact words

were these: 'By the way—where did you get those phoney checks passed?' Does that help any?"

My eyes were on him, and maybe they helped jog his memory because, an instant later, he let out a roar of laughter. He slapped me on the shoulder, almost knocking me off my stool. I recovered my balance and said, "Come on! Let me in on it! I'll laugh, too."

"You sure will, I bet! I remember now. I guess it's because I been thinking about Deacon lately. Anyhow, this is what it was: The guy is dressed to kill all the time. You know that. Clothes loud enough to scare a horse. That day you must be talking about, he came in wearing a striped blazer and a pair of red, green and white trousers. Plaid, they were, with enough squares to play checkers on."

"So what does that prove?"

"What I said to him. I said, 'By the way—where did you get those toney checked pants?' That's all I said. And he was right pleased that I noticed them."

And so, because Nick Lait—listening with one ear—heard the words "toney checked pants", and interpreted them to read "phoney checks passed", a murderer went to the gallows. Which certainly proves fate will use even misunderstanding and coincidence to run out a criminal's string of luck.

THE SECOND case I want to tell you about is of an entirely different nature, and could be titled "How to Commit A Murder". It was one of my own assignments.

About six-thirty one evening, we got word that a man was lying in a vacant lot in one of the city's better residential sections. A patrolman came upon the body while making his rounds, and thought at first the man was a drunk who had laid down for a nap while on his way home.

He speedily discovered this was not true when he found a nasty, blunt-instrument wound on the side of the man's head. It was mid-winter, snowless but cold, and darkness had fallen around five o'clock.

When I arrived on the scene, I discovered the victim to be a well-dressed, middle-aged man. He had been dead but a short time, obviously from the blow which had broken his skull. My first thought, of course, was robbery. A footpad with a club; resistance; a quick blow.

But this was dimmed somewhat by the fact that the man's valuables were untouched. He carried almost a hundred dollars in a wallet, some small change in his pocket, and an expensive gold watch in his vest.

Papers revealed his name as Joshua Timmins. His address was also recorded, and the sad job of informing his family fell to me. I went to the address indicated and found Mr. Timmins to be a widower who lived in a large, ten-room house with two children and a housekeeper. The children were aged nine and fifteen. The housekeeper, a small, white-haired lady, took the news of Mr. Timmins' death very hard indeed.

Timmins, it developed, was an investment banker who dealt in real estate, mortgages, insurance, and also operated, for his own account, in grain futures on the Chicago Board of Trade. In short, he was a wealthy man who could possibly have enemies.

I pondered the case and began going through the routine always followed where murder is involved; a dogged, humdrum search for information. The robbery theory was not by any means eliminated. Even though Timmins had retained his valuables, he could have been "accidentally" killed by a thief who fled when confronted with his own handiwork. If

this were true, my work wouldn't be too hard, because very few such cases go unsolved.

Most murderers of this type are either known to the police on past record or, more often, known to someone else—a friend, a landlady, a drinking companion. Very rarely does such a piece of information remain with one person. A detective with the connections which all successful ones have, will make certain inquiries and, sooner or later, something comes to the surface.

I MADE these inquiries, and also moved in other directions. I looked into Timmins' business connections and found two men who certainly had hard feelings toward Timmins. One of them, a Morton Lansing, was very frank;

"Timmins was a hard man to get along with. He was a gambler, but always with other people's money. I've known him a long time, but I never liked him much. I thought he knew what he was doing in grain futures though, and I gave him five thousand dollars to handle for me. He traded it under his own name and lost it."

"Do you feel it was an honest loss?" I asked. "Did he actually make the trades?"

"Oh, certainly. I had no doubts about that. I saw the papers, but I was sore just the same. I wasn't sore enough to kill him, though."

Lansing had trouble accounting for his movements at the time of the murder. He'd worked late in his office—he finally remembered that—and had gotten through and gone home. The only verification he could produce was the word of his wife who said he'd arrived home about seven-thirty.

There was nothing here to get excited about. The fact that Lansing could have murdered Timmins was a little help. He couldn't alibi his time, but under similiar circumstances, very few people could do so.

Before interviewing the other man I mentioned—Warren Thompson—I had concentrated upon Timmins himself—traced his movements as accurately as possible.

He left his office, acording to his secretary, about five-thirty, somewhat earlier than usual. From this point, it took quite a little investigating to trace his steps. He was in the habit of walking to and from his work, a trip covering about fifteen blocks and, on the night of his death, he had stopped in a shopping section near his home to make a small purchase in a drug store. He had also gone to his regular barber shop to have his mustache trimmed. I checked the shoe-shine parlor to the barber shop and several other places along the street only to draw a series of blanks.

In the meantime, nothing had turned up on the case from any other source. Several well-known underworld characters were hauled in and questioned with no result. Nothing whatever came over my grapevine and I was beginning to worry when I unearthed, from Timmin's secretary, the information that sent me to see Warren Thompson.

THOMPSON was a day laborer, a respected, sober individual, who lived with his wife in a small two-room flat. He answered my questions with a sullenness I attributed to fright.

No, he didn't like Timmins a little bit. He, Thompson, had worked hard and gotten the down payment on a bungalow for himself and his wife. Timmins had taken the mortgage and —though I was never sure—may have given Thompson a distorted picture of the laborer's obligations concern-

ing repayment. Thompson professed not to understand the payments were so large, saying he'd taken Timmins' word for it rather than reading the small print.

Anyhow, the day came when Thompson's bungalow was owned by Mr. Timmins and, right or wrong, Thompson felt he'd been robbed.

"I didn't kill him, though," Thompson said, and I was inclined to believe him.

So there I was. A respectable citizen had been bludgeoned to death in a manner calculated to make newspaper headlines. People were frightened, and the newspapers, with an eye to circulation, did nothing to calm the fears. The police department was thoroughly criticized, and rumors were broadcast to the effect that the Black Hand was starting a campaign of terrorism.

And I still didn't realize what a tough case I had on my hands; how close it really was to being completely unsolvable. I did not know that only one thing stood between the murder of Joshua Timmins and the unsolved file.

A man's conscience.

The case broke when a small, tense-faced Mexican came into headquarters and asked for the policeman who had been asking the questions about Mr. Timmins. He was brought to me and identified himself as Miguel Ramerez, the owner of the shoeshine parlor just next door to Mr. Timmins' regular barber shop.

"You look for the man who kill Mr. Timmins," Ramerez began. "You stop looking now. I kill him. It is on my conscience that I kill him, and I have to tell you so I can sleep."

The story was simple and direct. Timmins stopped in Ramerez' place on the morning of that fatal day, with a pair of shoes to be half-soled and also to get a shine on the ones he was wearing. Ramerez, a thoroughly decent man who worked hard for a scant living and tried to please everyone, slopped a bit of polish on the cuff of the hot-tempered Mr. Timmins' trousers.

Timmins, a class-conscious individual, must have been in a particularly vile mood. He kicked out viciously at the surprised Mexican. Ramerez, however, held his temper and took the abuse in the line of duty and promised to deliver Timmins' shoes to his home the following day.

BUT, EAGER to please the man, Ramerez finished the work that afternoon and, upon closing his shop, set forth to make the delivery that evening. Destiny led him through the darkness to the vacant lot which was the most direct route to the Timmins home. It put him on the footpath across the lot at the same time another man was making the crossing at a far more leisurely pace than Ramerez cared to travel. The Mexican sought to go around the man. The path was narrow. He slipped on the ice and jostled him.

The man, Joshua Timmins, whirled indignantly and saw, for the first time, who the man behind him was. Possibly, he thought Ramerez was there to do him harm. I don't know. Anyhow, he hurled a vile name at the Mexican and swung a fist at him.

According to Ramerez—and I thoroughly believe his story—he had had no intention, not the vaguest thought, of attacking Timmins. He was merely delivering a pair of shoes to a man who had abused him. And here, on a dark pathway, at night, he again encountered the man and again abuse was hurled. Ramerez suddenly saw red. There was a club in the refuse heap he'd been skirting. He swung the club blindly and killed Mr. Timmins with one blow. Then, he fled in

terror as his wild rage vanished.

The murder itself was not extraordinary in any sense other than one. It is certainly a perfect example of a truth any lawman will tell you: The hardest crime in the world to solve is the simple one. Let him plan it, decorate it with a lot of clever gimmicks, make it deep and clever, and he is doing nothing more than planting a string of clues for the lawman to follow.

But the tough ones have no gimmicks. Like that of Joshua Timmins. Ramerez, with no thought of murder, met up with his victim, took a club and hit him over the head and walked away. As simple as ABC.

But, you say, the crime was solved? I differ with you. It was not solved. I had no way of connecting Ramerez with it, nor would I ever have done so. He just happened to have a conscience stronger than his fear. In the majority of cases, fear is by far the stronger and will seal a killer's lips. He will not confess his single, unpremeditated murder, and the case will go unsolved.

If it's a simple case, that is.

THE END

EDITOR'S NOTE: The next story from John Shevlin's casebook, "The Case Of The Laughing Fugitive," appears in the October 1950 **MAMMOTH WESTERN.**

"THE BUNTLINE SPECIAL"

By Harold Gluck

FROM Mr. Edward Z. C. Judson who lived in New York, to the Colt factory in Connecticut, draw a straight line. Then, from the Colt factory to Wyatt Earp in Dodge City, draw another straight line. And then, from Dodge City to New York City, draw a third straight line. This produces a triangle, and the net result was a six-shooter christened "The Buntline Special".

Mr. Judson was a writer whose specialty was trouble—in the printed word or in real life. His pen name was "Ned Buntline", and he once turned New York City into a riot area. Edwin Forrest was a famous American actor. William C. Macready was a famous English actor. Both men played abroad and in this country. Ned Buntline didn't like the English actor, so with his pen he inflamed the workers of the city. Net result was the Astor Riot of 1849 in which many people were injured, a good number killed, the militia called out and the city had a nightmare.

Then, Ned heard about the Wild West. He started with a nice man called William Cody who was proficient in shooting buffalo and selling the meat on a contract basis. When Ned Buntline got through with Mr. Cody, the world knew all about "Buffalo Bill".

Ned wanted more material. He heard about Wyatt Earp cleaning up the West. So he headed out in that direction until he landed in Dodge City. Wyatt and some of the other peace officers talked with Ned. And Ned learned all about this cowboy capital. It matched and even surpassed Abilene, Ellsworth, and Wichita for trouble. Our author gathered data about gamblers, gunmen, thieves, and boothill. Then, he went back East to turn out his tales of the bloody West. It was remarkable what he did with a few facts and a lot of imagination.

In order to show his gratitude for the color supplied, Ned had the Colt factory make up five Colts—each a .45 with a nice long barrel, another 4 inches thrown in for good measure. These he presented to Wyatt Earp, Bill Tilghman, Neal Brown, Charlie Bassett, and Bat Masterson. Of course, the butt of each gun had the word "Ned" engraved upon it.

Wyatt carried two six-shooters, one the regular single action Colt known as the Peacemaker, and the other this beautiful brainstorm of Ned Buntline. Wyatt found a very efficient use for this gun. When an arrest had to be made and there was resistance, he didn't go for his gun to do some killing. Out came Ned's nice long-barreled creation, and the barrel was smacked over the head of the obnoxious offender. When the man awoke, there he was, nice and peaceful in jail.

And this all helped Wyatt Earp's pocketbook. For in addition to his marshal's pay of $250 a month, he received a bonus of $2.50 per arrest. In fact, Wyatt and his boys did very well on the bonus deal. They never quarreled about who was to make the arrest, for they split the bonus proceeds among themselves each month.

And Ned made out well with his bloodthirsty tales of the West, written back east!

INDIAN BLACKMAIL

By Wade Hamilton

RED MIKE was a fearless hunter and excellent trapper. He was afraid of no man—white or Indian. But he permitted one Indian to blackmail him, and with justification on the red man's part.

On this day, one he was never to forget, Red Mike went out hunting for his evening meal. At the edge of the timberline, he saw what appeared to be a jack rabbit. He observed the ears flapping back, so he aimed and fired his rifle. Up jumped an Indian who had been busily engaged in mending his moccasins. He wore a white rag tied around his head with the ends sticking up, so that Red Mike could be ordinarily forgiven for making such a terrible error.

"You tried to kill me," accused the Arikara.

Mike explained his mistake, but to no avail. The Indian had the perfect answer. "Who ever saw a rabbit here in the woods?"

Every time he saw that Arikara, Mike acceded readily to his demands for tobacco, sugar, or any other commodity.

CLEANING UP

By Bob Young

SIMILAR TO the Chinese New Year's custom of paying all debts, San Francisco merchants for many years balanced their accounts on Steamer Day. The custom, originated by the San Francisco newspaper *Star & Californian* in November, 1848, was based on the departure of steamers on the first and fifteenth of each month.

So, on the day previous, collectors marched from merchant to merchant, receiving, making payments, and closing out deals. They were always accompanied by a youth toting a large bag of gold over his shoulder, which in the annals of San Francisco was never molested by holdup men. Long after the steamers had discontinued their schedules, the twice-monthly settling of debts in the Bay City continued.

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THE SILVER TRAIL

By William G. Bolin

DURING THE silver boom era of the West, bullion from the mines often had to be hauled by wagon over long distances, and through man-killing country, in order to get it to a rail head or shipping point. It was up to the company that took on one of these difficult freighting contracts, to devise an efficient method of operation. A day's time saved on a long haul might mean the difference between making a profit or going broke.

Such a model of efficient operation was the freight line of Remi Nadeau, who in 1873 agreed to haul silver bullion from the mines near Owens Lake to the railroad at Los Angeles, more than two hundred miles of forbidding desert and mountains.

The first day's haul from the mines was the most perilous. Twisting down a steep mountainside, a narrow, eight mile long trail tested the courage and ability of drivers and their teams. The slightest miscue might mean a sudden death plunge over the side of jagged cliffs. When the bottom was reached, there was a short haul to a boat landing at Owens Lake. There, the silver bars were loaded on a staunch, eighty-five foot steamboat, specially built for the bullion haulers. This boat carried the cargo to the lower end of the lake, saving two or three days of road travel. There, the long desert trek began.

ALONG THE bleak, desert road, Nadeau had built a series of way stations to augment the few that were already in operation to take care of the water and food problems of travelers. These were spaced from thirteen to twenty miles apart, and every day from each station, two of Nadeau's fourteen mule teams, each team pulling three big freight wagons, would leave for the south carrying silver bars. At the next station, mule skinners and teams would stay overnight, to return to their original station the day following with northbound wagons loaded with supplies for the mines, and hay and provisions for the road stations.

With two teams travelling together this way, when a steep grade or any especially hard pull was reached, both teams would be hitched to one set of wagons to give extra power. Those particular twenty-eight mule teams were quite famous on the long San Fernando grade, but far from Los Angeles.

The entire operation involved the use of about eighty teams and scores of freight wagons. Before Nadeau took the contract, mine operators complained the freighting systems were too slow. Too much bullion had been accumulating at the mines, which were thus forced to cut down the scale of their operations. But the new system was highly successful, and the mines once again could operate at full blast.

But it's success was also the doom of such freighting over long hauls. For it proved how necessary to that part of the country good transportation was. And so the railroads were soon to replace the valiant men and the mighty mules of the desert trails.

A TIME TO FIGHT

By Maggie Boller

"You double-dealin' little chippy!" Burling croaked at the girl, as the bedroom door quietly opened and —Jiffy started toward him

All his life, Jiffy Tolman had taken the easiest way out. But then Agnes came into his life, and the easiest way became the hardest

THE RIDER ON the tall black horse was in no hurry. He slouched in the saddle, holding the reins loosely in the curled fingers of his left hand. He was a long-legged, lanky man who needed a tall horse, but the horse was the better looking of the two, in spite of his rough coat and tangled mane. The horse had an air of going some place, but the man

had the look of not giving a damn one way or another.

His blue shirt and levi's were frayed and faded from weather, his boots were worn down at the heel and scuffed gray, and the brim of his hat curled up with a kind of go-to-hell resignation that only long use could have given it. The man's face was not unpleasant. Lazy gray eyes were squinted half shut, and there was a look of weary tolerance which gave it a slackness in spite of a strong nose, a wide mouth and a long, stubble-covered jaw.

He was called Jiffy Tolman, and he did not mind the nickname which ridiculed his unhurried ways, especially when it came to hard work or trouble. In all his years of drifting, he had never found anything that was worth fighting for; and he had worked hard only once for something he wanted. That was the time he spent two years breaking horses for a tough old geezer down in the Panhandle. That was the time he earned his tall black horse.

"Take it easy, Oxhead," he murmured, as the horse pricked up his ears and tossed his head, pulling at the reins. There was a creek down below. "Easy now, dammit! I ain't gonna do no rough ridin' down this slope just because you want a drink. You think that crick ain't gonna wait till you get there?"

He closed his fingers, tightening the reins with a minimum of effort, and the horse stepped down the trail at a sedate pace, as if he carried a fragile old lady on his back.

Where the trail crossed the creek, there was a rig turned over on its side, and two old mules were still hitched to it, standing there helplessly tangled in the harness. They had churned the water into muddy yellow soup. Tolman gazed at the wreckage without interest and without surprise. He got down and led his horse upstream to where the water was running clear.

There was a young woman sitting under a cottonwood, crying away for dear life. Her skirt was wet to the waist, and her brown hair hung down over her face in long strands. He did not interrupt her. She must have known he was there, but she had her whole mind set on crying, and she went at it with a determined, night-long persistence. At the rate she was going, it probably would last all night. Tolman looped the reins around the saddle horn and slapped the horse's shoulder. Oxhead plunged down the bank, tested the water with his lip and buried his nose in the stream. Tolman waited with his back to the girl.

"Go away!" she choked.

"I'm goin' to, soon as my hoss gets his drink."

"Yes. Go. Don't you dare try to help me. Don't you dare to lift a finger!"

"Ma'am, I ain't doin' a thing!" he protested.

"No. Not a thing! You're no more of a man than any of the rest of them." Her voice came clearer now, and he turned to look at her. She had lifted her tear ravaged face to glare at him scornfully; but there was something terribly pathetic about her scorn. She sat there like a small, bedraggled witch and glared out of puffy red eyes. "You—you toad! You cheap imitation of a man! You—"

"Now, wait a minute, ma'am!" he cut into her hysterical outburst. "You mean you're all alone? There ain't nobody to—"

"You don't see anybody, do you?" she demanded raggedly.

"No, but I figgered he'd gone for help. I figgered if he was dumb enough to upset the rig in the fust

place, he was too dumb to set it right without help. 'Specially since he didn't even have sense enough to cut the mules loose."

"There isn't any him! You're talking about me!"

"You mean you made all that mess all by yourself?"

SHE COULDN'T think of anything savage enough to say to that. She just sat there with her mouth half open, panting a little. It was a soft, strawberry-colored mouth.

"If you're tryin' to think of a cuss word," he said gravely, "I got some good ones you can borrow."

She made a sad little mewing noise and started crying again worse than ever.

"Ma'am, it's gettin' on towards dark," he said loudly. "You just gonna set there a-cryin' all night?"

"You think it's funny!" she sobbed.

"I don't think it's funny. But I sure as the dickens ain't gonna sit down and help you cry about it. Now, you wanta straighten up an' maybe gimme a hand, I'll fix your golblamed buggy."

Her hands came away from her face and she looked up at him with unmistakable suspicion, still choking back sobs.

"I don't— Where might you be going?" she asked.

He pushed his hat back and planted his hands on the back of his hips. "What's my business? Where'm I goin'? Maybe you'd like a signed affidavy before I speak to those fleabit mules!"

"I have a good reason for asking," she said bitterly. "If you really do intend to help me and not just play a dirty joke, why then, I'm bound to tell you that you may get into trouble for doing it."

"Trouble with who?"

"Just anybody. Just anybody at all. Everybody is against me."

He looked off to the west where the sun was melting down in a spreading burnished pool and throwing up a rosy glow. He looked at the dispirited mules standing in the water. And he looked down the bank at Oxhead who was stripping the leaves off the tender cottonwood shoots and chewing painfully around the bit in his mouth.

"Maybe you better tell me about it," he said, and lifted the tobacco sack out of his pocket. He went and sat down, not too near her, and rolled a smoke. She sat there, clenching her hands in her lap, looking down and not saying anything.

"You oughta get those wet clothes off," he said.

Her head flung up defensively and her face flushed.

"Looky here," he said with a touch of exasperation. "I ain't goin' nowhere in partickler, but I'd like to be on my way. My name's Jiffy Tolman. Now, what's all this about trouble with just everybody? Might be you're a lady bank robber."

"I WISH I was!" she said grimly. "I wish I could have stuck a gun in Tom Tichnor's fat face today. The way he kept saying no, so politely, over and over again. I'm—my name is Agnes Cole—and I own the Tumbling R. I've got two hundred cows ready for market and nobody to drive them. Tom Tichnor holds a mortgage on the ranch and I can't meet the payment. He's going to foreclose. And Sam Burling is going to buy up the place dirt cheap as soon as the bank takes title. Sam Burling is behind all of it and nobody dares to cross him."

He expelled a lungful of smoke. "That all?"

"All! Isn't that enough?"

"When you spoke about trouble, I thought you meant gun trouble."

"Guns and fists," she said tightly. "How else do you think they got rid of all my men?"

"You figger Banker Tichnor will start gunnin' for me if he finds out I pulled your buggy out of the crick?"

"You still don't believe me. I guess you don't know what it's like to stand alone, with everybody else working together against you. They think a woman has no business running a ranch. They've been after me ever since my father died. They think I should get married and hand everything over to some man who never did anything to earn it. Every time I turn down a proposal, I make another enemy. The fight goes on all the time, but never out in the open. Things just happen. A man gets beaten up for some reason that has nothing to do with me, but he quits his job with the Tumbling R. Another man is accused of cattle stealing. They can't prove it, but they let him know he's not welcome here, and he draws his pay and moves on. Another man..."

Her voice went on telling it, as if it had been bottled up in her for a long time with nobody to tell it to. He heard what she said, but he was seeing something else. Something that had been buried deep in his memory for a long time. His eyes darkened with the shadow of remembering.

IT WENT BACK ten—no, twelve years ago. Twelve years ago his mother had been in the same kind of fix this girl was in. A widow trying to hold onto the ranch his father had worked so hard to build. Jiffy Tolman was Jefferson Tolman then, aged sixteen, and big for his age. Big enough to fight, anyway. But he hadn't fought. He had let his mother talk him out of it. They were skinned out of everything, and Mrs. Tolman opened a boarding house in town. Inside of a year she was dead, and Jiffy started drifting. He started building up the legend about himself. He was fiddle-footed and lazy, and he went out of his way to avoid trouble. That's the kind of a man he was, and he didn't care who knew it.

He had quit his last job when trouble started over a boundary line. He wasn't mixing in any shooting war over a boundary line. Not him. It took a kind of stubborn courage to live up to his legend. But he believed it himself. He had always believed it. Until now, hearing Agnes Cole tell the familiar story, he began to doubt himself.

He couldn't get over his feeling of surprise that he had carried this thing with him all these years without ever thinking about it. Why had he deliberately hidden that part of his life deep inside where it wouldn't bother him? It was there in his memory and he knew it was there, but it was something he never thought about. It was a part of the things he didn't care about—property, possessions, fixed ties and responsibilities, and all the grief and trouble these things entailed. He didn't care about all that, so why should he feel this sharp stab of pain and surprise as Agnes Cole brought an old memory to life? He shook his head several times as if to clear it of something he didn't understand.

The girl's voice stopped. He looked at her with wry exasperation, and she said sadly, "You don't believe me. You just don't believe me at all."

"I believe you. Only, I think you're a fool. Going through all this agony over a piece of land and a few cows. What if you do lose it?"

"I think I'd die. I think my heart would break."

THE KNIFE of memory turned cruelly, and he knew with cer-

tainty that his mother had died of a broken heart.

He got to his feet abruptly and went to look for Oxhead. When he came back with the horse, she was standing and trying to pin up her hair. She made a lopsided knob of it on top of her head. Her face was calmer now, but still sad and questioning. It was a sweet face with wide apart blue eyes and a pert pointed chin. It should have been full of gayety and laughter instead of sad, lonely tears.

"Them critters good or bad behavin'?" he asked gruffly.

"They're not bad. They're old. What do you want me to do?"

"You just stand there and kinda talk to 'em, so they know they're among friends, while I see if I can get those lines untangled."

"I hate for you to get your feet wet."

"I ain't fixin' to get my feet wet," he said crossly. "I ain't no hoss."

The aged mules looked at them with sad frustration, and Agnes spoke to them soothingly. "It's all right, Susie. Never mind, Bucky. We'll take care of you. Just be quiet now. It's all right."

It was like a echo of his mother's voice far down in his memory: "It's all right, Jeffie. Never mind, son. We'll make the best of it. Don't you start anything. It's all right." Telling him not to mind, when all the time it was her that was heartsick.

He stepped into the saddle and rode into the water with an angry frown. The mules jerked and splashed their feet when he stepped off on the canted buggy, but they were tired of fighting, and only one of them tried a half-hearted kick that set the front wheel spinning.

He talked to them abusively, and that steadied them more than Agnes's soothing murmur. They let him untangle the wet lines and tie them to the dashboard, and then he tied his rope to the iron braces at the side of the buggy and jumped into the saddle. As quick as that, the dripping rig was pulled upright and landed on all four wheels almost without a splash. Oxhead leaned back on the rope as the mules tried to scamper out of the water and go away from there. The big black held them to a plodding walk until Agnes had tied them.

"You better pull up some of that bunch grass to sit on," Jiffy said, after he had retrieved his rope. "The seat is soaked through."

She looked up at him sitting so tall in the saddle. "What are you going to do now?"

He sighed and looked at the rig, running his eyes over it carefully, as if to make sure it was all there. Suddenly, he swung down from the saddle and faced her. "I reckon I'm goin' with you."

"You don't have to do that!"

"Yeah, I have to. It's something... You just reminded me of something that I forgot a long time ago."

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THE TUMBLING R lay back in a long, sheltered valley with grassy uplands that were surprisingly rich in contrast to the barren country all around. But the ranch buildings were old, and the whole place had the forlorn look of an abandoned homestead.

Driving the weary old mules into the yard in the soft dusk, Jiffy Tolman had the eerie sensation of visiting a ghost ranch. He also realized fully for the first time that Agnes Cole actually was all alone here. There was something fantastic about it, something unreal, which made the whole thing seem impossible. His lazy mind stirred with a vague alarm, and he wondered what he was doing here. This was trouble and work and responsibility, and here he was riding

straight into it, with an odd pain in his chest that reminded him of hunger. But that couldn't be it. Man didn't feel hungry in his chest, but only in his belly.

He turned Oxhead into the empty corral and put the mules in the barn. And all the time he kept listening for sounds, for men riding in, talking and joking; pans rattling in the cook shack; horses snorting and trampling the corral; all the familiar sounds of evening. But there were none, and when he came out of the barn Oxhead poked his head over the rail as if he were lonesome.

"It's your fault!" Jiffy told him angrily. "You hadn't stopped fer a drink, we'd been in Carltown by now. You're in fer it now. You're gonna wish you was six hosses 'fore you get through roundin' up them two hundred cows!"

Now that he had said it out loud, Jiffy was aghast at the notion. "Whut am I talkin' about?" he muttered. "How the hell am I gonna shove two hundred cows down the trail single-handed?" He shook his head and went toward the house as if he hoped to find the answer there.

He didn't find it. Not immediately. His first impression was one of surprise. Somehow, Agnes had managed to start supper, change her clothes and comb her hair all in the brief time he had spent at the barn. She was a changed woman, and the change disturbed him, because he knew that he was the cause of it. Him. Lazy, good-for-nothing Jiffy Tolman. Just having him here made her think she had a chance, and she couldn't conceal the brightness of hope that was coming alive in her.

JIFFY'S OWN spirits sank in the face of her cheerfulness, and he wanted to tell her that he was no help at all. But somehow a man can't do that. Even a shiftless saddle-bum can't tell a woman he's no good. Glumly, he sat down where she told him to sit, and watched her flitting back and forth, talking at him as trustfully as if she had known him all her life. So little it took to open a woman's heart when she had been fighting alone with her back to the wall. It wasn't right.

She poured his coffee and set a plate of home-cooked beans in front of him. "You start right in," she said breathlessly. "Biscuits will be out in a minute. You'll feel better, soon as you eat."

Jiffy didn't think so. He didn't think it was that kind of hunger that ached him. He held the spoon suspended over the fat sugar bowl and looked at her with sudden sharp interest. Maybe it was woman hunger that had got into him. It had never had quite this effect on him before, then she was different from the kind of women he had loved before. He caught himself shoveling sugar into his coffee cup and put the spoon down angrily.

Instantly, she was beside him. "Isn't it the way you like?"

"No," he said roughly, "it ain't. And you're a damn fool!"

Shocked anger paled her and wiped the cheerfulness off her face.

"You're a damn fool for takin' in the first man you meet!"

"Oh." Relief flooded back with a warm flush, and she gave him a superior little smile. "I'm not afraid of you, if that's what you mean. Not a bit."

Jiffy was so taken back by this that he could do nothing but stare at the succulent brown beans, while she whisked back to the oven to remove the biscuits. "Like to know why the hell not!" he muttered under his breath.

She put a bowl of canned peaches

on the table, and Jiffy reached for the last biscuit and hesitated. "Maybe," he said, "you was gonna save some o' them biscuits fer breakfast?"

"No. They're much better when they're fresh. Go ahead and finish them. Tomorrow I'll make a cake." She was pleased, almost laughing at him.

"Cake would go good with canned peaches," he acknowledged, and sopped the biscuit in the fruit syrup. In spite of the problem ahead of him, he was fast succumbing to his old, easy habits. A good meal and a bed for the night were sufficient for any man, and no need to trouble the morrow until it arrived.

BUT HIS peace was short-lived. He had barely taken two drags on his after-supper smoke when he heard the horses in the still night. He remained as he was, leaning back in the chair with his long legs stretched under the table, and watched Agnes. Her slim back had stiffened and she lifted her hands from the dishpan and wiped them on her apron. But when she turned around, she was not frightened. Her small face was childishly stubborn and her blue eyes were dark and stormy.

"You expectin' anyone?" he inquired.

"No," she said tightly. "But I know who it is. It's Sam Burling. He saw me in town after I came from the bank. He knew I'd been turned down, and he told me his offer still stood."

"What offer was that?"

"I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man... The nerve of him! His first wife died from overwork, but he thinks now I'll be glad to fall right into his lap with what's left of the Tumbling R. After all he's done to drive me out!"

"If he's come a-courtin'," Jiffy drawled, "looks like I'm kinda in the way. Maybe I better—"

"No, no. You stay here. I don't want to be left alone with him. Here—" She crossed to the bedroom door and flung it open. "You wait in here. Please! Just so I'll know I'm not alone!"

Jiffy entered the small room with misgivings. With the door open he examined it—a big double bed, a chair and dresser, and a single window. There were clothes hanging from pegs along one wall. Woman's clothes. There was a faint sweet scent that reminded him of spring wild flowers, except that here it was more intimate; it embarrassed him. His first impulse was to close the door and climb out the window. But there was mosquito netting tacked over the window. Be a shame to rip that off her window. While he considered that, he was listening to the approaching horses, automatically judging the number. And it struck him as strange that a man would bring five or six riders with him when he came courting, even if the lady was known to be unwilling. He stepped back to the door and eased it open a bare crack, and leaned against the wall waiting.

AND NOW he heard the sounds he had listened for an hour ago. The men rode into the yard, laughing and joking. They unsaddled and turned their horses into the corral. Through the window he saw the light come on in the bunkhouse. He heard them dropping their gear, examining the bunks. They were moving in, no doubt about that! Half-minded to challenge them, Jiffy started from the wall, and then relaxed as he heard the man come into the kitchen.

"Evening, Agnes." The voice was hard and firm. Squinting through the crack, Jiffy got a glimpse of a big, red-faced man with a square jaw and brown eyes narrowed purposefully.

Here was a man with a temper, who blustered his way through life, and drove other men by sheer force of his hard determination. A man who could not bear to be crossed. Jiffy had seen men like this before, and disliked them with all the intensity of his freedom loving nature. They were invariably trouble makers, and they were nearly always wrong, even when they claimed to be upholding justice.

"You know you are not welcome here, Sam," Agnes said, and now there was a hard note in her voice, too.

"Welcome or not, I'm here. An' for your own good, you're goin' to listen to reason. This nonsense o' yours has gone far enough. How you think your pa would feel if he could see the shape the Tumbling R is in now—all on account o' your stubbornness?"

"You seem to forget that my father would never make a deal with you when he was alive. You tried hard enough then to get the Tumbling R. You even offered him a partnership, and he turned you down. What makes you think he'd be glad to see me hand it all over to you now, with myself thrown into the bargain?"

"You got it all wrong, Agnes! That schoolin' your pa give you was a big mistake. All it done was give you high-falutin' notions about fancy livin' that don't hold out here in the cattle country. You got to have pertection, an' you got to have a man to run this outfit. Great Scott! Ain't you had enough to learn your lesson yet!"

"I've had enough of your underhanded tricks, if that's what you mean! I know you're behind all the trouble I've had the past two years. You've got enough influence here to set everybody against me. You encouraged them all to pick on me by pretending it was for my own good. Oh, yes! You were going to bring the silly little schoolgirl to her senses, and then take over lock, stock and barrel. But you are the one who is mistaken about my schooling. It gave me something more than fancy notions."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"You think I turned you down because I am full of romantic ideas about love and marriage. The real reason was because I saw through your scheme to get the Tumbling R for nothing. You thought you could scare me into submission. What would you have done if I had accepted some other man? I have had other offers, you know."

"I'd have got rid of him, an' damn quick!" Burling's face was swelling with rage. "Stop your foolin' with me. Agnes! I ain't in no mind to take it. If you think I don't want you, you're crazy. I ain't never wanted a woman as bad as I want you. I—Stop foolin', will you?"

"I AM NOT fooling, Sam. I'm telling you straight out. You'll never get me, nor the Tumbling R. I'll let the bank foreclose before I'll hand it over to you. And when it comes up for sale, I'll see that somebody else outbids you, even if I have to offer myself as an inducement. I know why you're here tonight. You don't want to see it go into foreclosure, because it will cost you money then to get it...without me."

"Why, you damned stubborn little fool! You think I'll let you do that? I got five of my men out in the bunkhouse right now. An' tomorrow morning they round up your two hundred steers and start trailin' 'em down to meet the big drive. Your cows are goin' right along for sale, an' I'm puttin' up the money to meet the mortgage payment when it's due next Saturday."

"No. This is still my property, and

I'm ordering you to get off, and take your men with you!"

"You—you do, do you?" Savage laughter burst out of him, and he went toward her on unsteady feet, like a man driven off balance by forces he could not control. His voice turned thick and heavy. "I guess you don't understand what I been tellin' you. I'm stayin' here tonight. Here. You understand? An' tomorrow we'll ride into Carltown to see the preacher. I reckon you'll be willin' by that time. You'll be—" He reached for her and she whirled and fled toward the bedroom door.

The door opened quietly and Jiffy lounged there with a look of weary exasperation on his long face, his gun pointed at Burling. Burling was caught in an awkward crouch, and his shocked surprise gave him the appearance of a foolish ape. But only for a moment. He came erect in a murderous rage.

"You double-dealin' little chippy!" Burling croaked.

"Shut up!" Jiffy stepped across to take the gun from Burling's holster.

Thoroughly maddened now, Burling swung on him, sweeping one big arm to brush Jiffy's gun hand aside, and landing a wild punch on the side of his jaw. Jiffy dropped his gun and clamped long arms around the solid violence of the man. Burling had so far lost his head that he didn't make the outcry which would have brought his riders on the run. He wanted only to kill, and there was no room in him for any other thought. They wrestled across the kitchen in silent, straining fury as he tried to break the hold.

But there was nothing soft or weak about Jiffy's lithe arms. They held until Burling managed to butt him on the chin with a rocklike head, shattering his senses in a shower of stars. His arms loosened, and Burling broke free with a hard shove. Jiffy's feet carried him backward and his hand came down on the hot stove, shocking him alive. He had an instant, brilliant flash of the room. Agnes was still there, with his gun in her hand, pointing it at Burling with a wild look of terror. And Burling, panting hoarsely, had backed up and was drawing his own gun.

Jiffy's burned palm dropped to the stove again, grasped the hot handle of an iron skillet, and hurled it with a smooth underhand throw straight at Burling's maddened face. The heavy iron caught him high on the left temple, and he collapsed as if all the air had rushed out of him instantly. He twisted half around and fell on his face as the pan banged on the floor and clattered to rest.

Jiffy squeezed his eyes shut and shook his burned hand. The brief flash of clarity was followed by a rush of black dizziness, and for a while he was stunned and sick from the blow on his chin. He never knew how long he swayed there fighting the sickness; but he thought he heard his mother crying softly in the dark. Blood rushed to his head, and with it came pain that settled at the base of his skull.

He opened his eyes and said strangely, "Don't cry. Don't cry any more."

"All right," Agnes replied in a small, frightened voice. "I won't." She wiped the back of one hand across her cheeks, and brought him his gun.

LATER, THEY stared at each other across the big double bed on which the heavy form of Sam Burling lay like a profane intruder. His beefy face was no longer swollen with bluster, but collapsed and gray, the hard lines of his cheeks sagging loosely with each labored breath.

"You think he'll die?" Jiffy asked.

"I don't know. He's hurt bad. Inside his head. See, there's no blood. If he doesn't come to, I think he'll die."

"I never meant to kill him."

"I know. You could have shot him when he went for you. But you didn't. You dropped your gun."

"That was on account of his riders. I didn't want them pilin' in here. I had an idea if we could hold him quiet, his men would ride out early to round up your cows, and once they started the drive, you'd have a fair chance of getting your cows to market. Meantime, I was gonna persuade him to write out any instructions we needed to keep things moving in the right direction. But if he dies—"

"If he dies, I'll take the blame. A woman has a right to defend herself in her own house!"

"No." Jiffy shook his head sadly. "It can't be like that. I stepped in and bought this one. Man don't always get a second chance."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Let's just say I dealt myself a hand, and now I got to play it out. Won't do no good for you to try to slip me an ace, because I won't take it. I ain't playin' that way... this time."

He turned and walked out into the kitchen, rubbing the back of his neck and staring ruefully at the puffed red palm of his burned right hand. Agnes picked up the lamp and followed him, closing the door softly.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

He looked at her standing there holding the lamp steady, with her chin up and no fear in her eyes, and he laughed softly and without mirth.

"You're about the toughest proposition I ever run acrose," he said. "What I'm gonna do is mosey on out to the bunkhouse and get acquainted with the boys. I got to make sure they ride out in the morning with no questions asked. What you got to do is keep an eye on his nibs, to make sure he don't come to sudden-like and start hollering murder!"

AGNES LET him out at the front of the darkened house, and he made a wide swing around the yard to the rear of the bunkhouse. A faint light came through the single dusty window, and he crept up to it cautiously. Their voices came to him, relaxed in idle talk, and he saw that a poker game was in progress at the plank table. They were discussing the Tumbling R and its stubborn mistress with the casual cruelty of underlings who had only to obey orders and take none of the responsibility for their acts.

"I'm su'prised he waited as long as he did," a whiskered hardcase remarked. "Been two years now since Ray Cole fell off his hoss, ain't it, Cap?"

Cap was a lean, mean-eyed hombre with harsh lines in his dark face. There was a hard warning in the look he lifted from his cards, but the whiskered gent seemed not to see it. "What makes you think I been keepin' track of the time?" Cap asked, and his eyes went around the table challenging all of them because they were suddenly still, like men waiting for a certain answer.

"Well, you was there," Whiskers said mildly. "I figgered you'd ought to remember if anybody did."

"Sam and me was ridin' into town, and we just happened to find him. That's what you mean, ain't it, Sid?"

"Yeah. That's what I mean." He flipped his cards face down on the table. "I pass."

The moment of tension was over, but the antagonism was still there. Jiffy sensed it as strongly as if he

had been in the room with them, holding a hand in the game. Cap was a straw boss for Sam Burling, and the men resented him. Jiffy examined each of the men more carefully, and knew suddenly that any plans were useless. There was a man there who knew him. Tough little Shorty Bates had worked with him, and knew him as well as any man had ever known him. Any hope of running a bluff on these men was lost now.

He prowled around to the barn and found his bedroll where he had left it when he unsaddled. He came up to the front of the bunkhouse with the bedroll slung over one shoulder, and leaned in the doorway blinking sleepily.

"Where the hell'd you come from?" Cap snapped.

"Out yonder. I was fixin' to cut some wood for the lady. But I guess I musta fell asleep. I been ridin' for—"

"Jiffy Tolman!" Shorty Bates roared enthusiastically, delighted to find the victim of his sportive humor once more at hand. "Come right in, son. You're a sight fer sore eyes!"

"Wait a minute!" Cap barked as Jiffy started toward a bunk.

"Aw, hell, Cap! Jiffy's all right. He's the fella I told you about. Worked with me up in Montana on the C Star. Half asleep all the time. 'Member the night you was snoozin' in the Red Front Saloon, Jiffy? An' we stretched old Pop Akers out on the floor, an' poured ketchup all over him, an' shot off your gun? Ho-ho-ho, Jiffy thought he was a goner that time, fer sure!"

THE OTHER men were grinning now expectantly. But Cap said, "What're you doin' here?"

"I was hired today. I thought the lady didn't have no other hands. I'm sure glad to see—"

"You know what we're here for?" Jiffy looked around at them stupidly, and Cap went on harshly: "We're roundin' up two hundred beef steers, and runnin' 'em down the trail. Whatta you think of that?"

"She tell you to do it?"

"No."

"Well, I work here," Jiffy said, looking troubled. "So I guess I got to tell you, you can't do it. Not unless she says so."

"Now, ain't that too bad!" Cap was almost grinning himself now. "We come all the way out here for nothin'. It'll be all right if we sleep here, though, won't it?"

"I guess so. Long as you don't keep me awake." Jiffy went deliberately to a bunk on which one of the men had already spread his blankets.

"Whup! No, you don't!" The whiskery Sid dove into the bunk and put up his boot heels defensively.

And now, they all joined in the game. There were ten bunks in the room and only five men to occupy them. But each bunk that Jiffy approached was suddenly occupied by a heel kicking cowpoke as the other men jostled against Jiffy, shoving and crowding him every step, and tripping him when he tried to step away. Finally, he appealed to Cap.

"You're the boss," he said in an aggrieved tone. "Why don't you make them quit it?"

"Maybe they don't want you in here."

"What do you expect me to do, sleep out in the barn with them flea-bit mules?"

"That's just what I expect you to do." Cap's eyes gleamed wickedly. "Shorty! Carry his bedroll out for him, and see that he's tucked in nice and warm."

"Now, listen here!" Jiffy protested. But the agile Shorty had already caught up his bedroll and dashed out.

"I guess maybe you think that's funny," Jiffy said in a tired voice. "If it wasn't so late, I'd go up to the house and report it. But I'll see Miss Cole first thing in the morning. And don't let me ketch you tryin' t' move any steers until I get her orders."

HE WAS followed out to the barn by their hooting laughter, and entered the barn grinning tightly. A lighted lantern hung from one of the posts, and Shorty waited roguishly. He tossed Jiffy's bedroll into one of the stalls, startling the old mule who came awake kicking. Jiffy came toward him still with that tight grin on his face, his eyes narrowed and glittering in the lamplight.

"Same old Shorty, always funnin'." There was a kind of savage caress in the way he said it through his teeth, and the roguish look slipped into uncertainty on Shorty's tough face.

Jiffy gave him a powerful whack on the back, suddenly seized him by the collar and seat of the pants and ran him to the door of the barn, and booted him solidly out into the yard.

Shorty reacted hastily to cover this ignominious treatment. "Ho-ho-ho!" he shouted in the night, for the benefit of any who might have witnessed his hasty exit. "Same ole Jiffy! Always funnin'—always ho-ho-ho!" There was a gasp of pain in there somewhere, but he made it look good, swallowing his outrage rather than letting the others know that the fool had turned the tables on him.

But Jiffy regretted his impulsive act almost immediately. He was in no position to risk their suspicion. At any moment, Sam Burling might recover. A blow on the head was a chancy thing; there was no way of telling how long a man would stay under, or how fast he would come alive. And Jiffy had to wait now until the men were safely asleep before he could slip back into the house.

It was a long and tedious wait, and he dared not fall asleep, though his body craved sleep as a man dying of thirst craves for drowning in a river. His easy habits nearly undid him in this dangerous hour. Long accustomed to sleep when he was tired and to wake only when he was fully refreshed, his mind and body resisted his will to stay awake, and kept slipping into that smooth gliding river of sleep. He sat upright against a post in the darkened barn and tried to keep his attention fixed on the door of the bunkhouse. Burling's hard-eyed foreman might have enough nerve to approach the house even at this hour to check up on Jiffy. And if Burling groaned, or cried out...

Jiffy snapped out of a doze, and knew it was late. There was no light showing from the bunkhouse, and the ranch house was dark and silent. He crawled out of the barn and started a slow, careful circle around the yard to the front of the house. Before he reached the porch, he knew he had waited too long. Sounds were coming from the bedroom, and a light came on. Burling's voice was raised in sick anger, but the words were incoherent. Nevertheless, they were loud, and growing louder in the still night.

Jiffy ran the last few steps and burst into the front door, stumbling over furniture in the dark parlor. In the bedroom, Agnes leaned over the far side of the bed, trying to quiet Burling's delirious raving. And outside, the door of the bunkhouse banged and booted feet ran across the hard-packed yard.

Swiftly, Jiffy rounded the bed, pressed a huge pillow down on Burling's face, and pulled Agnes roughly into his arms. Startled, she clung to him, looked up in breathless alarm, and he kissed her.

FOR A long, tense moment the kiss held, and the lamp threw the silhouette of their merged bodies on the tight drawn shade at the window. Only muffled gasps came from under the thick pillow.

At last, Jiffy heard a sly chuckle in the night, and two pair of feet went back to the bunkhouse. The door closed quietly.

Jiffy raised his head, and unconsciously his arms tightened for a moment, pressing Agnes against him tenderly before letting her go. She did not immediately move away, nor did she look at him, but she said in an odd little voice: "Thank you. Thank you for trusting me to understand." And then, more insistently: "I do understand."

"Do you?" Jiffy's lazy, half-sad smile touched his face briefly, and he turned toward the problem on the bed.

Burling was no longer trying to shout, but he was muttering angrily. When Jiffy lifted the pillow, he said quite distinctly: "Ray! You damn stubborn fool. You can't hold out against me! What I want, I take. I tell you, I'll marry Agnes and take the Tumbling R, if I hafta..."

"My father," Agnes said painfully. "He thinks he's fighting with my father."

"You fool!" Burling groaned. "You saw that, Cap! He came at me...I hadda hit 'im..." The mumbling went on. Over and over again, Burling fought with his obsession.

Agnes put cold wet cloths on his head, and the mumbling subsided to a murmur with only an occasional name or word spoken distinctly.

Jiffy said carefully, "I want to ask you about your father, Agnes. Did you ever think there was anything queer about the way he died?"

"It was an accident. He was alone, riding to town. The horse threw him."

"The men out in the bunkhouse mentioned something about it. Did you know that Sam Burling and his foreman, Cap—"

"They found him, yes. But he was already dead. He...the coroner said he had lain there for a good long while before they found him."

"I wonder. The men seem to think Cap knows more than he's telling. And putting that with what Burling just said... Well, it looks to me like maybe Burling and Cap met your father just before he died. They could have fought, and—"

"Oh, no! You don't think Sam killed him?"

"That's just what I think. But proving it now, after two years, would be something else again."

THE MEN in the bunkhouse were stirring long before daylight, and they were unusually quiet. Jiffy's mild objections had stirred them with a devilish eagerness to get on with the job of moving Agnes's cows just to prove their high-handed authority. If they looked for him in the barn, they undoubtedly concluded that he had taken his blankets out to some less odorous bower, and was now comfortably asleep in his customary lazy fashion. While they stole a march on him, and made him look like a fool. At the time, Jiffy thought the laugh would certainly be on them. And he watched them ride off in the dark with a grim satisfaction.

He had removed Sam Burling's clothes and got him between the sheets, not so much for Burling's comfort, but because a man without his clothes is apt to be more docile. He had eaten breakfast, and it was full daylight before he went outside. There were two horses in the corral, and neither of them was Oxhead.

The fury that had prompted him

to boot Shorty out of the barn now returned full force, and with it a new awareness of all the indignities he had suffered in the past. The loss of his horse served to rip away from his lazy vision the last illusion about himself. And he saw himself truly now for the contemptible clown he had been; pretending he didn't care about the things that mattered, so that he wouldn't have to face his own conscience for that first fatal weakness. That weakness that cost his father's homestead and his mother's life, when he reneged on the challenge to fight. He knew now that the easy-going philosophy that had moved him for the past dozen years had been false. He had built it up in his own mind, to save his own face. He wanted to believe that he didn't care enough about worthwhile things to work and fight for them. Because if he did, he would have to admit that terrible failure in the beginning. He admitted it now with savage self-accusation, and knew that he had been driven to an impossible choice.

If he let Oxhead go now, the chances were that Agnes's cows would get safely to market, and the money would be available in time to satisfy the bank's claim. But if he let Oxhead go, it would be the final crushing blow from which his mutilated pride could not recover. The tall black horse was his only possession, the one thing he cared about. And some inner prescience told him that if he let the horse go now, he would never see him again. Having taken him, the men would sell him, and there would be no proof to back up Jiffy's claim....

BY NIGHTFALL, the five man crew had already gone far down the trail. The fact that they had rounded up the steers so quickly could only mean that they had previously been at work on the Tumbling R, without Agnes's knowledge or permission. Burling's plans were already well advanced when he paid his visit. The men were making camp on the bank of a shallow stream. They had already crossed the steers, which were grazing peacefully on the far side.

Jiffy rode Burling's big sorrel into the camp and got down without a word. Shorty straightened from the campfire and stared at him uncertainly, having already tasted Jiffy's unexpected temper. Sid, with his whiskers intact, but his boots off, sat on a blanket and eyed him humorously.

"You're kinda late, bub," Sid said. "You have a good sleep?"

"Where's my hoss?" Jiffy asked Shorty.

"Was that your hoss?" Shorty made an attempt at jocularity.

"You know damn well it was." He stepped across and cuffed the astonished Shorty on the side of the head.

"Hey, wait a minute, friend!" Sid stood in his stocking feet. "Cap's the one took your hoss. He's the one you wanta see. Here he comes now."

The lean foreman crossed the stream and rode Oxhead straight up to where Jiffy was standing. Another kind of anger flickered across Jiffy's cold, solid fury as he saw that his horse had been used hard.

"Get down!" he said flatly.

The meanness in Cap's narrow face tightened, almost with pleasure. "Make me," he taunted, and his hand caressed the holster on his hip.

"Steady, Oxhead!" Jiffy said as the horse moved his feet, watching his master.

What happened then was a shock, not only to Cap, but to the two men watching. The foreman's hand was already on his gun and it was clearing leather when Jiffy shot from the hip. It was so close, the bullet

seared Cap's coat sleeve and froze his gun arm as he flinched aside. Oxhead quivered, but stood steady.

"Get down!" Jiffy said in the same flat voice.

Cap looked at the gun, not knowing it was held in a blistered palm as sensitive as a net of bare nerves. He got down and faced the gun.

"All right, Shorty! Sid! Take him, you—"

Nobody moved, and Jiffy said, "They don't like you any better than I do, tinhorn. They know you got a hold on Sam Burling on account of the way Ray Cole died. That's the only reason you got the foreman's job. They don't like you, and I don't blame them. You're a mean-tempered sidewinder, and no self-respecting cowpoke ought to have to take your guff. You're a no-good, black-mailing skunk and..."

Jiffy went on talking, abusing the already infuriated foreman as the other two men crossed the stream and came along cautiously, dismounting and joining Shorty and Sid.

Cap realized now that he was alone, and his thin mouth twisted viciously. He half turned as if to speak to the four men, and then whirled and ducked behind the black horse, firing wildly.

"Giddap, Oxhead!" Jiffy shouted. The black horse lurched and grunted, staggered a few paces and fell, topping like a mighty statue.

Jiffy had held his fire, and now he was blinded with hot rage. He squeezed the trigger, but the lean, crouching foreman stayed there and returned his fire. The bullet struck like a hard driven fist against Jiffy's ribs, knocking him backward. He braced himself with one foot behind him and fired again. His knees folded, but his eyes remained fixed on Cap's narrow, brown face as it dissolved in a liquid red flood and faded backward as the dead man fell.

BANKER TOM TICHNOR was a pompous and officious man, small in stature but with an immense expanse of shiny, bald head. He made it quite clear that in calling on Agnes Cole, he was breaking a hard and fast rule. He was, in fact, shattering precedent. Agnes brought him into the bedroom where Jiffy lay, somewhat uncomfortably.

Banker Tichnor had come to congratulate Agnes, and to assure her that she was a favored client. He had been in touch with the eastern bank, and verified the deposit of $3,600 which had been placed there in her name by her father just prior to his death two years ago.

When Jiffy removed Sam Burling's clothes, Agnes had bundled them together and put them away in another room. Some letters and papers had fallen out which she did not look at until later, after Jiffy had ridden off. She was startled to see her own name on one of the envelopes. It was written in her father's hand, and addressed to her at the eastern school where she had been when he died. He had promised her a surprise for her birthday, and instead she got the news of his sudden death. Here, then, was the surprise, and he had been on his way to town to post it when he met Sam Burling and Cap. There was a small red bank book enclosed, showing the deposit, and the letter with his full signature was to be used as her identification. The money was to be used to purchase fine furnishings for the ranch house.

"Burling swears your father's death was accidental," Tichnor declared. "He says your father got mad and took a swing at him, and he hit back and knocked Ray off his horse. But the fact that he took the letter off your father's body, and kept it all this time, that's what makes it look bad. He says he done it to save the

money. Claims it was plumb foolishness for you to spend all that money on fancy furniture. He figured to get the money back after he'd married you. And maybe he did mean well, but it don't look so good, the way he done it. He's got to stand trial, and I figure the court will send him up for a few years, just on general principles. I guess you won't have no more trouble out of him. And his men turned over the price of your cows, a nice fat check that I put to your account."

"THERE WON'T be any trouble about the foreman?" Agnes asked.

"No." Tichnor looked at Jiffy's long, pale face speculatively. "The men said it was a fair fight. This fellow Cap stole your man's hoss, and started the fight when Tolman showed up. There's four witnesses. Can't ask for more than that."

"But it was so unnecessary!" Agnes cried. "If only I had found that letter before! He wouldn't have needed to ride off to fight, and...and even after he was shot, he had to persuade those men to go on and sell my cows in time to meet the mortgage payment. It wasn't necessary at all!"

"Yes, it was," Jiffy said quietly. "That was part of the hand I dealt myself. I had to play it. I lost my hoss, but...well, I played the hand. Now, I got to be gettin' on. If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to ask your help gettin' me my clothes and gettin' me outa here. I—"

"What! Well...uh...yes. Yes, I see. It is a little unconventional, just the two of you here. But no need for you to move. I can get a woman to come out from town to stay here. Just to make things look right, until you're—"

"I can't stay here!" Jiffy insisted with a touch of exasperation.

"I thought..." Banker Tichnor hesitated, his natural caution coming to the fore and making him suspect every statement he heard. He turned to Agnes. "Didn't you tell me he was—"

"Yes," Agnes said, and her chin came up willfully as she looked Jiffy straight in the eye. "This is the man I'm going to marry. Just as soon as he's able to stand up!"

Jiffy stared at her unbelievingly. "Agnes, you don't—"

"Yes, I do!" she said firmly. "I know very well what I'm getting. And it's just what I want. It's what you want, too. You know it is, Jefferson Tolman. Isn't it?"

"Yeah." He couldn't keep the happy grin off his face. "Yes, it is. I didn't think I stood a chance. I was—"

She came and leaned down and kissed him, right smack in front of Banker Tichnor, who didn't seem to mind at all.

THE END

GOLD — IF YOU RECOGNIZE IT

By Merritt Linn

JOHNNY THREW his miner's pick down disgustedly as he walked away from the dry diggings near Hangtown, California. He strode away solemnly, vowing to himself he would never again spend his time trying to find gold.

Johnny was just plain sick and tired of chipping out the earth, which he considered gold-bearing, putting it in a sack and lugging it off to the creek and rockers, where the gold was washed out. He had done it himself and watched hundreds of other miners do it since '49.

They had tried carts, burrors and everything else, and had finally decided the human back was the only thing that could traverse the rough terrain fast enough for

them to make a meagre living from the "color".

As Johnny sat on the crest of the hill watching the men, he was struck with the idea: "Why aren't they using wheelbarrows? The single wheel and large capacity for ore would be just the ticket."

A few days later, using a borrowed forge, Johnny offered the first wheelbarrow to the miners. The first one was eagerly snapped up. Business was good from then on. Johnny smiled as he thought of how much easier this was than trying to grub out gold.

Johnny stayed in Hangtown until he had amassed a considerable fortune. Then, he left for the Eastern states, eventually winding up in South Bend, Indiana, where he again went into business for himself. This time, it was wagons.

The boy that dug the gold of opportunity in Hangtown, instead of gold ore, was John M. Studebaker, noted manufacturer of automobiles which bear his name.

COWBOYS ON STRIKE

By Mildred Murdoch

IN THE spring of 1883, some cowboys in the Texas Panhandle decided to strike for higher wages. They ended up by accomplishing very little in the way of personal gain, but their brief insurrection speeded up the strong opposition to the big cattlemen which was being felt all over the West in those days.

The idea of a strike started when roving crews from three of the large ranches along the Canadian River met while out looking for drift cattle. The men had their supper together, and got to talking about the wage situation, and how things were getting to be a lot different for the cowboy. They felt that they were losing something important, and becoming mere hired hands. The big outfits kept extending their ranges, and buying or scaring out the small owners, while setting up more and more rules and regulations for the men who worked for them. The cowboy used to be more of an independent workman, with a say as to how things went, and more often than not he ran a few cattle of his own, or had some horses.

Now, the big outfits were getting a firmer grasp, their owners organizing to prevent mavericking and other activities which might deprive them of some of their profit. Instead of partners, full of loyalty to a pioneer boss, the cowboys had begun to feel that they were only "little" men, hired employees of the big interests.

And so this small bunch of cowboys, gathered around the evening campfire, decided that they would have to organize also, so that by the strength of a united front, they could better their own situation. They meant business that night, and before they took to their blankets, they had drawn up an ultimatum, and twenty-four men had signed it. In their proclamation, they agreed that cowboys and cooks should not work for less than $50 a month; and bosses should get at least $75 a month. April 1 was set as the date for the strike. Cowboys had been getting around $25 a month, while the pay for wagon bosses varied considerably.

NEWS OF the strike spread rapidly through the ranches of the area. A camp for strikers was established near the town of Tascosa, a settlement which had plenty of saloons and gambling houses to keep the men entertained while they waited. There were in the camp about a hundred men, who had declared themselves to their employers and gone off to await the results.

But the thing fizzled out, as far as gaining any widespread improvement in the lot of the cowboy. Some of the cattlemen met the cowboys' terms. Others offered compromises, which some of the men accepted. There was very little effort made by the strikers to intimidate those cowboys who continued to work at the low wages, or who accepted compromises. A few of the owners met the demands by simply firing all their men. There were dozens of men coming into the country every week wanting work, and so it was not hard for any employer to fill up his ranks, though he often had to take inexperienced men, or young nester boys. Practically everyone knew how to ride and rope, and was accustomed to hardships and long working hours, so an owner could find plenty of men who were glad to work for almost any sum offered.

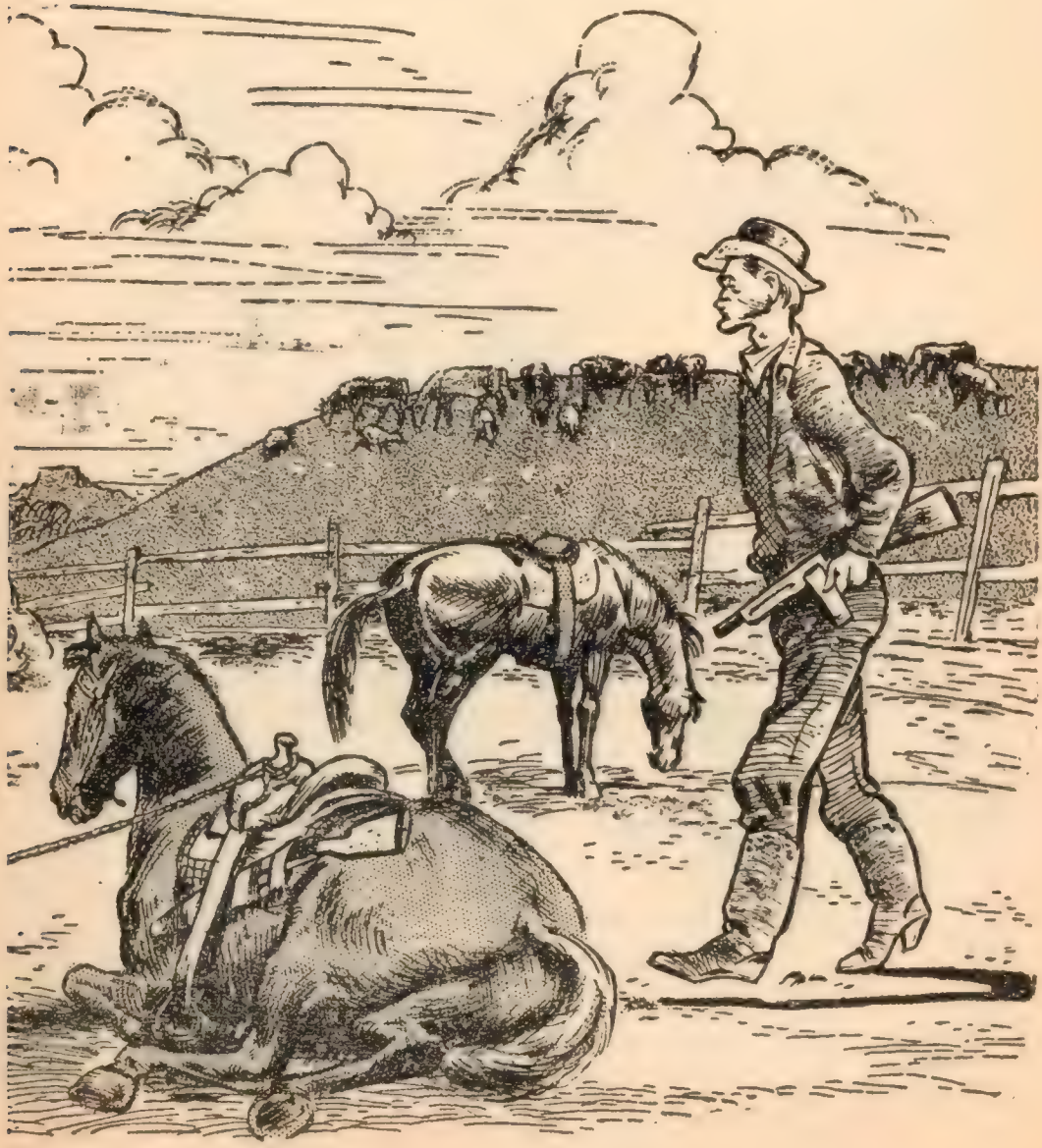
The cowboys at the strikers' camp soon grew restless under the inactivity, and became short of funds after a week or so of drinking and gambling. They began to drift away, some to ranges in other parts of the West, some to work in the small frontier towns, some to try ranching in a small way on their own. A few of them, among those who had become most angry at the changes on the range, determined to get what they could out of the game, and went into active rustling, continuing their fight against the big cattlemen in that way.

As far as the progress of the cattle industry was concerned, the strike was a complete failure. Spring roundups and the moving of trail herds went on just as usual. The large outfits were able to find the men they required. But the big cattlemen had been needled in a new way. It was just another incident in the long war waged in the West between the big outfits and the little men.

EDITOR'S HOLIDAY

In the April issue of MAMMOTH WESTERN, our "Editor's Holiday" consisted of a "mistake picture" laid in the Old West, complete with a gal in shorts and even a puppy dog scratching his little ear. We thought it was pretty good, but darned if we didn't get some complaints. Seems we made it too easy by asking you readers to find only ten of the mistakes. Too simple, some of you waddies figured, and wrote in telling us so.

Okay. We stand corrected—and now we're getting really tough. We're publishing another "mistake picture" this month, and you aren't getting off so easy. We're doubling the ante this time, and we're making them tougher to stop. If you can find the twenty mistakes in this picture, you're just plain good. Take into consideration that the year is 1900, the locale Arizona. Check page 85 to see your score.



HIGH SING the PINES

By Lee Floren

A man is only as strong as the courage that drives him on in the face of all odds

PROLOGUE:

THEY STALK across the dim pages of California history and their boots are muddy and thick of sole. And the wild California rivers—the Feather, the American, the Sacramento—hurried on to the

Max Hoffman's face turned white. He doubled his quirt and leaned forward in the saddle

Pacific, unmindful of the men who fought and died and loved and grubbed for gold. There were Negroes and Bohunks and Swedes and Englishmen, and they came from any section of the globe, and they came for gold.

A few found gold. Most of them found disappointment. But one man did not come to California to dig and fight for gold. He came to regain his health, and his name was Albert Hamilton.

Albert Hamilton, M. D.

HE WEIGHED around one hundred and sixty pounds, which was not enough poundage for his height, and so he looked slender. He wiped away sweat and looked at his hand.

Once, his hand had been soft and supple, but now it had the thick marks of hard physical labor on it.

" 'Tis hot, Rachel."

"But it is a healthy, dry heat, Albert."

Rachel was a small-boned woman. Her eyes were sharp and quick and dark, almost as dark as obsidian. She had a form that a man sees and remembers.

"Can we lift another log, Albert? Don't over-exert yourself."

They were building another room on their log cabin. They raised the log and rolled it laboriously up the skids and Rachel took her half and more of the weight. This was the top log and gravity fought them. Both were breathing heavily when at last it was in place. Rachel leaned against the wall and panted.

"All this work for a room, Albert," she said shakily. "And back in Pennsylvania we own a fine rock house. When you get back, you will appreciate home."

"I always did appreciate home, but I like this house more because we built it ourselves."

"Oh, shaw, now."

The wind was warm and soft and good, yet Albert coughed a trifle—a cough that brought a sharp glance from his wife.

"Not another thing today will you do but rest, Albert. There, the baby is crying for her bottle."

She went around the corner. Dr. Albert Hamilton coughed into his handkerchief but found no trace of blood. His breathing settled and his muscles lost their stabbing ache.

"We need some milk, Albert."

He got the pan from Rachel and went to where the goat grazed on her leash in the wild, thick grass. Just then, a man rode excitedly into the clearing. He rode a mule and his saddle-pockets were extended with their loads.

"Damn that fat Dutchman!"

"What's the matter, Bill?"

Bill Hamilton dismounted. His right foot was a club-foot. "He wouldn't take your check, Albert. He demanded gold. I had to pay him in gold."

"What did he say then?"

"He asked where I'd got the gold. I told him it was none of his business." Bill Hamilton looked at his brother as he untied his saddle-bags. "He wants this claim, the Dutchman does. Oh, he didn't come right out and say that, but he aims to get our claim."

"I think you're wrong."

"That's because you're too trusting, Albert."

"You have to have some faith in humans, Bill."

"Don't have any in the Dutchman!"

Bill led his sweaty mule to the creek for water. Rachel came out of the cabin carrying the baby, and Albert realized she had heard every word.

"Do you really think Mr. Hoffman

wants our claim, Albert?"

"I don't know."

Bill turned the mule loose and came back. "The gold has played out in this area. Miners are leaving Soda Creek for northern diggings. The rush is over. From now on, it'll be pan work for a day's bread. Either pan, or work quartz."

"We have a sheriff in this county," Albert reminded.

"Sure, and where is he?" Bill answered his own question. "Over a hundred miles away over in Plumas. We get no protection from that distance. The creek has been panned dry. By luck, we stumbled on this gold."

"I came to get well, Bill, and not to hunt gold."

"But the gold is here," Bill repeated.

"I came for health, not for gold."

Rachel watched and was silent, and her eyes showed her fear.

WITH THE miners came men who were human vultures. They were the saloon-keepers and the gamblers and they got their share of gold through crookedness and thievery. When the miners moved, they followed them.

But Max Hoffman stayed behind.

Although Max Hoffman had followed the miners into this gulch, he was no human vulture. He was very wide and he was not very tall and his blond hair was cropped short to his round skull. He had very thick forearms and very big hands, and he could throw a drunk out with one big heave. Hoffman had made money in the Plumas rush, and he had located a saloon and store on this creek.

Max Hoffman was greedy. Placer mining, he knew, was playing out; quartz mining was the big field now. But to mine quartz, a man needed machinery, and machinery cost money. But there were rumors of a transcontinental railroad, and then he could ship in machinery. He had made a half-million dollars in the last few years and he still had it.

He wanted to control all the land along this creek, for the quartz held gold, and he wanted that gold. He'd bought worked-out placer claims from miners, buying them for a few drinks of whiskey or a few dollars. When he had control of the creek, he would then ship in machinery even if he had to freight it in with wagons and mules.

"I want to buy your cabin, Dr. Hamilton."

"It is not for sale, Mr. Hoffman."

But Max Hoffman shook his Teutonic head stubbornly. "Every man, sir, has a price." He glanced at Rachel and mentally compared her with his fat, Germanic wife. "And you have yours, also."

"My claim is not for sale."

Bill watched with his hand on his pistol. Rachel held the little girl and watched, too.

"You can settle somewhere else, Doctor. I understand you came to get rid of consumption. There are other places in California as healthy and dry as this creek bottom. How much gold do you want?"

Bill spoke. "Ten thousand dollars."

"That is too high. What do you say we cut it in two? I pay you five thousand."

Bill glanced at his brother.

"This is my home," Albert said. "I do not sell."

Their eyes met—the Feather River blue eyes of Albert Hamilton and the faded-blue eyes of Max Hoffman—and each read the other's indomitable stubbornness.

And when Max Hoffman spoke, his voice was guttural and harsh. "Five thousand in dust and not an ounce more."

"No."

Rachel watched, and again felt fear. She was happier here than in Pennsylvania, for Albert was almost well and she now had her child. She thought, a pick is jabbing at the foundation of our happiness and will split the rock and spill it, and that thought was terrible.

"I come to you openly, Doctor."

"You came to me once and ordered me off. I did not go, so you try to buy. Money means little to me. I only want enough for my wife and child and my brother and myself."

"You should go back to your practice in the east."

Bill Hamilton said, "Are you the boss of man's destiny, Hoffman? Are you God, to order men around?

THE TEUTONIC paleness fled from Hoffman's face. He doubled his quirt and leaned forward in the saddle, but he did not hit. Rachel grabbed for her brother-in-law although she held the baby, and Albert Hamilton quickly took the gun from his brother's belt.

Max Hoffman let the quirt unwind, and the color came back to him as he straightened in saddle. "You get no more supplies at my store, gold or no gold!"

He rode away.

He was big and wide in his saddle and he rode at a walk across the clearing. A bullet could come from behind and hit him and kill him, yet he rode with a dogged, stubborn slowness.

Bill was hot with rage, but Albert still held the pistol.

"Shoot him through the spine, the stupid ape! Kill him while we have the chance, or he'll kill us! Kill him!"

Albert shook his head.

Rachel released her grip on her brother-in-law, and the baby started to cry in her thin wail. Rachel carried her into the house.

Albert Hamilton watched Max Hoffman ride into the brush before he handed the pistol back to his brother.

"That took courage, Bill."

"He knows you wouldn't shoot! He knows you're a coward! I'd meet him and whip him if it wasn't for my bad leg—"

"Be quiet."

"We can get no more supplies at his store! There isn't another store within a hundred miles! Plumas is the closest store!"

"I'll talk to him later."

"Do you no good."

BILL WORKED with his pan and sluice-box. He had at last found a way to make a living. Up to now, his club-foot had kept him from earning his own way.

Many times, Albert caught his brother looking at him. And each time their eyes met, Bill looked aside. He was worried.

Maybe, Albert thought, I am a coward.

Then, he would look to the east and at the peaks of the high Sierras. A man, he thought, is made of many things. He's an odd creature.

"Will we ever go back to Pennsylvania, Albert?"

"Do you want to go back, Rachel?"

She too looked at the snow-tipped Sierras. "No, I do not want to go back, husband. I love it here. But if it means your life, then I want to return and take you with me."

"He did not come to me and ask me civilly to leave. He came and threatened me."

"Don't be as stubborn as he."

"I'm not stubborn. I'm just standing up for my rights."

They went into the timber and cut another log and trimmed it and

dragged it into the clearing with the mule. Two days had gone by since Max Hoffman had threatened them.

They had been long days, and worry had overshadowed each moment of them, a worry none of them would confess to having. Bill would come in for his meals, and the club-foot would eat in silence, and then he would return again to the creek, walking in his lurching fashion.

"You skinned your knuckles, Albert."

He looked at his hands. They were thin hands and the bones were not strong. His hands were no longer the smooth hands of a surgeon. But still, they were small hands, weak hands. He compared them to Max Hoffman's giant fists.

"I'm afraid for Bill."

"Why?"

"The food supply is running out. Each meal, he looks into the pantry. He will ride in and brace Hoffman, I'm afraid."

"I'll talk to him."

"That will do no good."

He kissed her. "Don't worry, honey."

But she was worried and he was worried and Bill was worried. Time dragged by, one day, another; still, Hoffman did not strike. He held the strings of the bag. Hunger was in the bag.

That night, Albert lay awake and for some reason thought of Harrisburg town. He remembered its eternal sounds, the never-ending noise of the city, the city that is never at rest. He remembered the hospitals in the hours past midnight, and he remembered their sharp smells—those smells sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet. He had done much work. But his heart had not been in it. He had deluded himself all through medical school.

His heart was in these mountains. He had seen this little creek and he had thought, this is it; this is where I want to lie when I die, and this is where I want to *live*.

High sing the pines on the Sierras. The wind is in them, and the wind murmurs, and the black bear lumbers along, looking for his sweet roots, for his honey-trees, for his berries. Sing, wind, sing, sing through the high pines. Sing for me.

Then, deep sleep came.

BILL SAID, "If he comes against me again, I'll shoot him."

"He won't come against you."

Bill looked at him and said, "I'm going to hunt some grouse." He took his rifle and went into the brush, heading for the slope of the mountain. When he came back, he had four grouse.

"We'll need supplies tomorrow, Albert."

Albert nodded.

"I cannot shoot down flour and salt," Bill reminded.

Bill went to his pan. He was making a few dollars a day, and not much more. He kept saying there was quartz-gold in the mountain. But it would take thousands of dollars to get in machinery to mine it. But Max Hoffman would get the machinery and Max Hoffman would mine it.

"But first, he has to get our claim," Albert had said.

"He's smart. He's tough, too."

Albert and Rachel talked about going to Plumas for supplies. But it was a long, long way, and Albert could not leave Bill alone with her, for Bill might go against Max Hoffman when his brother was gone. And they could hardly send Bill. He was no mountain man; he was crippled.

Albert remembered Max Hoffman's big fists. That night, he lay in the dark and held up his right hand and made a fist out of it. With his other hand, he felt of that fist and

wondered if he were really a coward.

A few days went by. Bill only grunted; he did not speak now. He panned until late at night and his poke grew. Albert awakened many times to hear Bill talking in his sleep and turning on his grass-mattress. Bill buried his gold along the creek not even telling his brother the location of his cache. He did not want Hoffman to steal it.

Rachel said nothing, but she watched them.

Albert knew his wife was worried. He caught this worry in her dark, clean face, in her dark, clear eyes. She seemed to be holding her child continuously these days.

Bill looked at her, then at his brother. "I wonder," Bill said, "if a fist fight would settle it." Then he shook his head. "No, Hoffman only respects a gun."

Rachel did not hear the remark.

Albert said, "Hush, brother."

"We're out of salt. We have no baking powder or flour."

"I'll get some."

"You? How?"

"I'll get some."

Bill said, "I can see that," and limped to the creek.

Rachel had skimped on the floor. It had run out first, though. Albert wondered if he could intercept a wagon-train on far-away Donner Pass and get flour. But the pass was over a hundred miles to the east.

That night, Rachel lay silent beside him. Albert thought, and the pines sang their endless song.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I get supplies."

She asked no questions.

ALBERT slowly dismounted from his mule, his hands sticky with sweat, a great fear in his heart. When he came into the store with its many odors, Max Hoffman was taking a barrel of flour into the storeroom. He set the heavy barrel down as Albert walked to the counter.

"I have a list of supplies I need. I'll take a sack of flour from that barrel."

"Oh, you will, eh? My man just freighted that flour in. Next month I have engineers coming, and I need that flour."

Albert looked at Hoffman's big hand that lay on the barrel. He looked at it, and then raised his blue eyes. "I'll buy some flour. I have dust."

"Your dust is no good here. Freight your flour in a hundred miles on your mule from Plumas!"

Albert Hamilton looked at the giant hand again, noticing the huge knuckles, and he looked at his own puny hand. His hand came up and slapped Hoffman across a thick jowl.

"If you won't sell me flour, I'll take it!"

Hoffman rubbed his jaw, and his eyes held a devilish glint. He came around the counter and he said, "You get no flour from me!"

"Then I take it."

Hoffman hit, then; Albert went under the blow. His fear was gone, for some reason, and he felt his fist smash into Hoffman's thick face. It was like hitting a huge, hard pillow. Hoffman sent out one mauling, bearish blow, and Albert went back to the wall.

"You want to fight, eh?"

Albert did not remember it all. He remembered fighting, and he remembered he was cold inside, and he remembered saying, "Don't let him clinch with you. He'll kill you if he clinches."

He remembered, later, when they knocked over the counter.

It spilled with a great crash of the scales and a scatteration of canned goods. And he was surprised to see Max Hoffman fall with the counter.

But Hoffman got up, even though not too fast.

Hoffman panted, "You can fight, Albert!" There was awe in his voice. And Albert thought that was a very odd circumstance.

Hoffman hit, and Albert went back. This time, he felt no pain. He hit at Hoffman and missed. Hoffman knocked him down again.

When Albert fell, he spilled a rack of canned goods. He got up and Hoffman came in, beating him.

Albert glimpsed Mrs. Hoffman standing in the doorway. Her hand was at her open mouth and her eyes held terror.

Albert knew his face was bloody and crushed. He tasted the fine sweetness of blood, but he got to his feet again and again.

All together, Hoffman knocked him down seven times.

But the doctor kept getting up, for he was game. Once, he arose like a wounded lynx, crouching and coming out of that position. That time, he sent Max Hoffman back. Hoffman's shirt was in ribbons, and his belly hung over his belt, and he breathed as hard as a wind-broken horse.

Again Albert hit the floor, and again he got to his feet. But this time, Max Hoffman did not knock him down. He grappled with Albert and pinned Albert's numb arms at his sides.

"Albert, you are the bravest man I have ever fought. I will not kill you. Never have I seen a man as brave as you are, Albert!"

Albert listened, the words coming from a great distance, his body sick and pain-filled.

"You get the flour you want, Albert. My good wife, she is my witness—you get the flour."

Mrs. Hoffman nodded, tears in her eyes.

THE MINERS came back with their thick-soled boots, their profanity, and their raw strength. They were Norwegians and Bohunks and Negroes and Englishmen and others from the far reaches of the earth.

They tore into quartz; the gully became known as Roaring Camp. Other settlements came into existence—towns that are dead and forgotten today—for towns follow men to their graves.

Sierra pines heard the smash of steel on quartz.

And two men were partners. One was the Wild Dutchman Max Hoffman. The other was Dr. Albert Hamilton. If you dig into the history of California's gold-rush, you can find a passage or two telling of their terrible fight.

"My partner," Max Hoffman would say. "My fighting partner, Dr. Hamilton."

THE END

Answers to "Editor's Holiday," page 76:

(1) The cattle are grazing in opposite directions. Cattle always head in the same direction while grazing.
(2) The brand on the hide of the calf and the brand on the iron are not the same.
(3) The rope should be around the calf's hind legs—not its neck.
(4) As indicated by the windmill, the trees in the picture are leaning in the wrong direction.
(5) Sheep and cattle never graze together.
(6) You wouldn't find a member of a branding crew using an English saddle.
(7) The cow pony holding the calf would never be lying down.
(8) Two of the men in the picture throw shadows in opposite directions.
(9) One of the men is wearing only one chap.
(10) The calf's hind hooves are hose of a horse.
(11) The wrong end of the branding iron is in the fire.
(12) The rifle in the saddle scabbard has no trigger or trigger guard.
(13) There are no reins attached to one of the bridles.
(14) The horn on one of the saddles is turned the wrong way.
(15) There are no palm trees in range country.
(16) One cowboy has his bootheel missing.
(17) A stirrup is missing from one of the saddles.
(18) There was no TV in those days—so the antenna is wrong.
(19) No tommy guns in those days, either, so the guy carrying it is out of his time.
(20) The wagon in the picture has only three wheels.

SILENT GUNS

Mungo King's problem required gunplay. But bullets aren't the only things that carry a lethal sting . . .

The buzzing clouds were all around the horses and men—clouds of furious, angry insects

By Giles A. Lutz

MUNGO KING stopped suddenly, and his head lifted. He thought he heard the bleating of sheep, and he was positive he smelled the damned things. Neither of the sensations were new, except that they seemed to be coming from his side of the fence.

He yelled for his nephew, Chet King, to follow him, and broke into a run, swearing at the aged stiffness of his joints. He topped the little hill,

and an inarticulate roar of fury burst from him.

A thin white line of Jethro Lich's sheep was filing onto Mungo's land. The trickle looked as though it'd just started, but Mungo knew it wouldn't take long to grow into a white, devouring flood, smashing and cutting his grass and flowers to pieces.

He ran down the hill, yelling at the top of his voice, and Chet pounded along behind him. The sheep lifted their heads, stared bewilderedly at him, then scattered before his charge. A few went back through the gap in the fence, the rest of them streaked in fifty different directions across his land. It was a good thing Mungo couldn't see the herder at the moment. He would've tried to kill the man.

He finally stopped, panting for breath, letting the breeze fan his heated face. This senseless chasing was doing no good, and he motioned to Chet, then went about it more calmly. They moved slowly back and forth in a huge half circle, drawing it constantly tighter, and driving the sheep before them. Now and then, one of the stupid, stubborn beasts would make a break, and Mungo forced his tired legs into a run until he headed it off. It took them a half hour to push all the sheep back onto Lich's land. Mungo's face was black as he looked at the trampled foliage, at the bare spots, where the sheep had eaten to the ground.

The last sheep crossed through the gap, and Mungo walked to the fence. There were three strands of wire down, and he picked up the ends. His eyes were frosty as he looked at them. Those wire ends were clean and bright; they'd been cut.

Mungo knew what'd happened. The herder had cut the wire, then left the gap for the sheep to discover, to trickle through on their own. And Mungo knew Lich had ordered that.

Chet said eagerly, "This is the second time you've found cut wire. What are we going to do about it?" He had the Kings' thinness of mouth, the bigness of bone. He was only fifteen, but already he'd reached a man's stature, and a decisiveness was forming under the immature lines of his face.

Mungo thought troubledly, he should be laughing a boy's laugh and running and yelling like a boy. He couldn't remember even seeing Chet grin. He thought heavily, he's been through a lot, and only time can soften it.

Mungo forced himself to say calmly, "We'll talk to Lich."

The scorn in Chet's eyes went across him like a rasp. He kept his mouth grimly shut as he went about repairing the fence. He was a big man with a harsh-cut face, weathered into an old saddle color and lined with age. His mouth was wide, but thin, and his gray eyes were set deep and brooding. He looked at his gnarled, twisted hands. Those hands had killed men, more men than he liked to think about now. For whatever pretext a man used to kill another, in later years the pretext faded, and only the memory of the dead man's face remained, shadowy, but still tenacious in its haunting.

CHET HELPED him with a sullen unwillingness. Repairing that break was hard work. They really needed additional lengths of wire. They went back several fence posts on each side of the break and loosened the staples on the severed strands. It took all of their strength to pull the wire tighter, so that they could get enough slack to twist the cut ends together. Mungo got wire-cut on his hand, and the swearing rumbled deep in his throat.

Chet wiped the sweat from his face. He said angrily, "All this work for land that's used for nothing but raising bees. I could see some sense to it, if we farmed it, or ran cattle."

Mungo said flatly, "No plow's ever touched this section. No cattle or sheep have ever hoof-cut it. It's going to stay that way." Everywhere he looked on his land, he saw a solid carpet of flowers of all colors and sizes. He'd lived for too many years of his life on the harsh plains country, and he'd found a peace in this lush section of California valley.

He pointed across the fence at Lich's land. "That's what sheep do for land. Cattle are almost as bad." Lich's acreage looked barren after the colorful growth on Mungo's. Mungo scowled at the hoof-slashed turf across the fence. What the hungry mouths of the sheep had missed, their sharp-edged hoofs had trampled into the ground. Mungo's land was an oasis in a desert. Pomeroy's place, to the east of him, ran an even larger number of sheep than Lich did. Mungo thought gloomily, he was surrounded by the damn things.

He looked at Chet, hoping to see an understanding, and saw only that sullen indifference. He sighed and turned toward the house. He'd hoped that Chet would grow to love this section as much as he did.

Some of the heavy thoughts left him as he saw the house. It'd started out as a one-room cabin, and he'd built and added onto it, until now it was a fair-sized house. All around the house were scattered the little white-box hives. Mungo had almost four hundred of them, each of them filled, or being filled by the industry of the bees. Twenty years ago, he would've laughed if anyone had told him these little insects would bring him happiness and a living. Honey was down in price, but even at eleven or twelve cents a pound, those bees made them a comfortable living. He had two barrels of honey he'd planned on taking into town this afternoon, and he was suddenly angry that he'd have to waste the afternoon trying to talk to Lich.

HE SAID harshly, "You want to go with me to talk to Lich?"

He was startled to see how the spark flamed in Chet's eyes. Chet ran into the house, and Mungo slowly followed him. He called to his wife and didn't hear her answer. He guessed she was out in back somewhere.

He walked into their bedroom, suddenly dreading the coming talk with Lich. He was sure of what Lich was trying to do, and words would never turn him. Lich wanted this section of land; he'd even made a tentative offer.

Mungo knelt and pulled a little trunk from underneath the bed. He opened the lid and lifted out a cloth-wrapped bundle. He unwrapped it and looked at two black guns, their cartridge belts meticulously wound around them. He hadn't looked at them for several years, and he couldn't quite say why he was looking at them now.

He heard a little gasp and turned his head. Martha stood in the doorway, one hand raised to her throat. He looked at his wife, wondering at the fear in her eyes. He felt the swift rush of affection that he could never quite put into words. Her hair was white, and there were lines in her face, and it was still the most beautiful face in the world to him. He'd been past forty when they were married; he always thought of the wasted years before that with a deep sense of loss. She'd refused to marry him until he'd put away those guns, and he'd been unable to shake her

resolve. She had been very firm.

She cried, "Mungo, you aren't going to—"

He said testily, "I was just looking at them." He bridled before the look in her eyes. "These are honest guns, Martha."

Tears sparkled in her eyes. "Mungo, you said you'd never wear them again. You said—"

He made a sudden gesture of impatience, cutting her words short. He rewrapped and put the guns back in the trunk. He said gruffly, "Martha, you got no cause to fear." He wasn't sure himself what'd been in his mind—some vague idea of showing those guns to Chet to wipe the scorn from his eyes, of telling him about those years as town marshal.

He could hear Martha's words of the past as clearly as though she were saying them now: "Mungo, I'll never marry you as long as you carry them. Each time you left the house, I'd wonder if you'd come back. A woman can't live with that kind of worry eating away her heart."

IN THE end, he'd realized how important she'd been to him. He'd put up those guns, and they'd left the little plains town. He'd found this piece of land, and the shadow had disappeared from her eyes.

Putting away the guns now should've dispelled the fear in her eyes, but it hadn't. He said, "What is it, Martha?"

She spoke slowly: "If you didn't intend using them, then why is Chet in his room, strapping on a gun?"

His eyes widened. He didn't even know the boy had a gun. He brushed past her, shaking his head as she started to follow him.

He softly shut the door behind him, and Chet didn't hear him come in. The boy was faced away from Mungo, crouched in that old, familiar attitude. The cartridge belt was buckled to its last hole, and was still loose on his skinny waist. The heavy gun hung far down on his leg, and it would've been funny, if it hadn't been so serious. Chet's right hand was a stiff, splayed claw. It dipped, and he tugged at the pistol. It came out of the holster in a convulsive jerk, and Mungo wondered how many secret hours Chet had spent in practicing that draw.

"Chet," he said softly.

Chet whirled, his eyes startled at the interruption. He looked young and ludicrously awkward, and still there was a man's hard determination under that awkwardness.

"What are you doing with that thing?" Mungo demanded.

"You said we're going to see Lich." Chet's voice broke on the last word, and he colored. Mungo thought heavily, if I'd have put my guns away sooner, I could've had a son. He felt all of his sixty years, and the longing for those lost years returned with more force than ever.

His voice was harsh. "I said we were going to talk to him. Take it off." He moved deeper into the room, and Chet's hands covered the belt's buckle.

"It's mine," he said in shrill defiance. "You can't take it away from me." His words poured forth in a torrent. "It belonged to Dad. He wanted me to have it. You don't care what happened to him. Everybody's forgotten. I ain't. And I ain't ever going to."

PAIN CROSSED Mungo's face. He hadn't forgotten his brother's death, nor the matter of it. But doing something about it was another matter. Mungo knew his brother's weakness. Wade King had been a quarrelsome man, and many people resented his hard-handedness. No one knew who'd killed him. He'd been called to the door of his cabin one

night, and the shot-gun blast from the darkness had riddled him. The killer had ridden away into the night, and though people might have their suspicions, there was no proof. Chet's mother had died when he was small, and with his father dead, Mungo had been his only living relative. Mungo had been glad to have the boy come to him, but from the beginning he'd known there was something eating him. This was the first time he'd come to grips with it.

He sat down on the bed and said gently, "I haven't forgotten Wade, Chet. You being here is part of that not forgetting. There are some things a man can't do, and it's best he forget them as quickly as possible."

Chet said wildly, "When I get older, I'm going to do it. I'm going back and find that man. And I'm going to kill him."

Mungo shook his head. "Even if you found him, killing wouldn't end anything. Some of his kin or friends would come after you. And you'd have to kill them to stay alive yourself. It'd go on and on until there wouldn't be any peace left for you."

He caught Chet's scornful glance and thought heavily, he thinks I'm afraid. Mungo wanted this boy's respect more than anything else in the world. He wanted to tell him about those two black guns. Chet would understand that, and the scorn in his eyes would be replaced with an admiring gleam.

He stood up and said in a tired voice, "Take off that gun."

He walked out of the room and nodded at Martha. "It's all right."

Was it? He didn't know. What if Lich refused to talk; what if Mungo had to go beyond words? He had Martha and Chet to think about. If this thing came to violence, he knew the impression it'd make on the boy, and Chet's mind leaned too far that way now. Then, there was the land. He thought fiercely, nothing will happen to it.

He hitched the team to the light wagon and drove to the front of the house. Chet wouldn't look at him as he climbed in. Maybe I've already lost him, Mungo thought wearily.

He shook up the reins and drove down the lane, leading to the road. It was flanked by carefully aligned bee hives, and the sight of them always pleased Mungo. Today, he didn't see them.

HE TURNED into the road, leading to Lich's place. He thought of what he was going to say to Lich and found no hope. He'd already come up against Lich's arrogant attitude, and he thought today would be more of the same.

They stopped at Lich's place, and one of his men insolently said, "He's in town. He's got things to say to you, too."

Mungo bleakly stared at him until the man dropped his eyes. He turned the team, and Chet asked, "Are we going home now?"

Mungo caught the note in Chet's voice, the note that said Chet thought he was afraid. He felt this thing closing in on him, and his rage built to match it. He said harshly, "We're going to town."

Not a word passed between them all the way there. Mungo drove stiff-backed down the main street, keeping an eye open for Lich. He carefully rehearsed what he was going to say. He had to make Lich see reason, and angry words wouldn't do it.

He saw Lich sitting on the porch of the Merchants' Hotel and hauled in his team. He climbed stiffly down and tied the team to the hitch-rack. He was aware of Chet's hard scrutiny, and he thought wearily, I can lose him for good now.

Pomeroy and a couple of other men were on the porch with Lich. Mungo

wanted to talk to Lich alone. He stepped up onto the porch and said, "Lich, could I speak to you in private?"

Lich was somewhere in his early forties. He'd gone heavily to fat, and his little eyes were sunk deep in the mass of his face. He took the cigar out of his mouth and said, "These are my friends. Whatever you got to say, say it here."

Mungo put a hard hand on his swelling anger. He said slowly, "Lich, my west wire was cut this morning. Some of your sheep were on my place. We shoved them back." He could make a threat now, but he didn't know how far he was prepared to back it up. He said painfully, "I don't want any trouble, Lich."

Lich's eyes were bright with malicious triumph. He looked at the faces around him, then back at Mungo. Two of the men had the same eager, greedy look as Lich's. Pomeroy's face was blank. Mungo couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Lich said, "I'm not responsible, if a few of my sheep break your wire and wander onto your place."

Mungo said stubbornly, "That wire was cut, Lich."

LICH'S FACE blazed, and his voice rose stridently. "You calling me a liar, King?" He waited until Mungo's eyes swung away, then said, "You're out of step. This is sheep country. We make our living off of sheep. If you don't like it, get out. I've made you a fair offer for your land. Take it or leave it."

He threw it down flatly, and Mungo could pick it up or run from it. Mungo felt the weight of his years on his shoulders. He started to turn away, and Chet was screaming with wild anger.

"We'll kill any damn sheep that comes on our land. You hear me? We'll kill them."

Mungo pulled him away, worriedly shaking his head. Chet's wild words had pushed this beyond the possibility of farther talk. He thought heavily, stop kidding yourself, Mungo. It was already beyond it.

He shoved Chet up into the wagon and climbed up himself. Pomeroy came off the porch. He was a big man with a reserved face. Pomeroy said, "King, I know you don't like sheep. That's your business. But I'd take it as an unfriendly act if one of mine got onto your place and you killed it."

Mungo stared at him, then slapped the reins against the team's rump. The drive home was a silent one. Chet spoke only once: "You crawled in front of him."

Mungo didn't look at the boy. He didn't look at him as they got out at the house, he didn't look at him during supper. He told Martha about it in the privacy of their bedroom. "If it was just Lich and me involved, I'd stop him, Martha. I'd stop him quick." He felt her shiver beside him, and knew she was thinking of those black guns. "But Chet's thinking too much that way already. I didn't accomplish anything, Martha. Lich will get bolder because he thinks I'm afraid. And I think Chet will leave because he despises me."

"You want him to stay, don't you, Mungo?"

He said in a dry whisper, "I want him to stay, Martha."

Sleep came without bringing any solution. There was the land and Martha and Chet, all mixed together.

MARTHA LOOKED tired in the morning. She stopped for a moment, as she went about getting breakfast, and placed her hand on Mungo's arm. "This is our land, Mungo. We won't leave it."

He patted her hand and turned his head so she couldn't see that his eyes

were stinging. She was still afraid of those guns, but she knew how much the land meant to him. She was telling him that whatever he did, she would understand.

He said gruffly, "Ain't that boy up yet?" He opened the door to Chet's room, and the room was empty.

Martha said, "I didn't see him get up. Maybe he's out back."

Mungo stepped to the door. He opened his mouth, and the yell never came. He heard the faint, far-away reports of a gun, drifting to him from the west. He counted three shots, and fear clogged his breathing.

"I'll be back," he yelled at Martha, and broke into a run.

He couldn't keep it up all the way to the west fence. He'd stop to catch his breath, then fear would drive him on again. He saw moving figures ahead of him, and his eyes, watery from exertion, wouldn't let him see clearly.

"Hold it," he yelled. "Hold it." He ran up to them and stopped, panting hard. For the moment, it was all over. And he knew with a heavy certainty that it'd just started.

Chet's gun was leveled on two of Lich's herders. The two men were dragging a sheep's carcass through a break in the fence. Mungo saw two dead sheep lying on Lich's land.

Chet's face was rock-hard, and Mungo thought with an awful bleakness, he's grown-up, he's old before he's supposed to be.

Chet said scornfully, "I wasn't afraid of them. I laid out here and watched them cut the fence. I killed the first three sheep they drove through. Tell Lich I'll kill every damned sheep he tries to drive on this land."

One of the herders snarled, "Maybe he'll have something to say to that. Maybe—"

Chet gestured with the gun, and the man hastily broke off his words. "Fix that fence," Chet ordered.

MUNGO LET him have this moment. He couldn't have stopped it, short of laying hands on the boy. He waited until the herders started away, then turned toward the house.

Chet walked beside him, a hard satisfaction in his eyes. "Now, you'll have to do something. Lich will be coming."

"Yes," Mungo said bleakly. Lich would be coming. Mungo could stop him with guns, but Chet had already had a taste of that path, and the shine in his eyes said he was hungry for more. It wasn't much of a step for him to be shooting at men, and once that step was taken, Mungo didn't know where the boy would stop.

Chet said with rich contempt, "There's time to run."

Mungo looked at him with blazing eyes. "I never ran in my life. There's ways of settling things without guns."

Chet's assurance broke before the fire in Mungo's eyes. He seemed young and uncertain as he asked, "How?"

Mungo didn't know. His thoughts raced desperately, and he didn't know. He saw that crack in Chet's assurance slowly close. They were in sight of the house before Mungo's eyes widened with the sudden thought. It was a crazy idea, but it might work. If he had enough time.

He snapped, "Take that damned gun off. And go find me a ball of cord and a knife."

He ran to the tool shed and got a hammer, conscious of the passing of every second. He broke up a dozen short sticks of equal length and ran to the farthest hive, from the house flanking the lane. His movements were slow and gentle now, consistent with the temper of the bees. The bees buzzed petulantly around him, but they were used to him, and he

wasn't stung. Sweat popped out on his forehead. It seemed as though it took forever to fix a hive the way he wanted it. He moved directly across the lane and worked on another. He moved twenty feet closer to the house, and Chet came toward him with the cord and knife.

Mungo grunted, "Stay clear," and went about his work. He saw the question on Chet's face, but he had neither the breath or time to answer it.

When he'd finished, he'd worked on six hives, three on each side of the lane, covering a space of forty feet. He wished he could've had more time, but these would have to do.

He cut six long lengths of cord off the ball, ran to each hive, and was busy for a moment. He played the lengths out along the ground toward the house. They were long enough to reach around a corner of it, and he laid the ends on the ground in a loose mass.

Chet started to say something, and Mungo said, "Stay here. When I yell your name, jerk these cords. Jerk like hell. You hear me, Chet?"

Chet nodded, wide-eyed, and Mungo hurried around the corner of the house. He'd been working under too much pressure, and he felt limp and drained. If this didn't work... His mind shied away bleakly from the alternative.

HE THREW a glance down the lane, and at the far end, he saw dust slowly rolling up into the sky. The rise in the ground hid from sight whoever was making the dust, but Mungo had no doubt as to who it was. His time had almost run out.

He ran into the house and on into the bedroom. He pulled out the trunk and lifted out the black guns. He hurried into the front room, and Martha's eyes were big, dark splashes in a white face.

Mungo laid the guns just inside the door. He said grimly, "I'm holding it won't come to them." He ran outside and down the lane. He stopped fifty feet from the house, drawing hard on his lungs. Lich and two of his herders were in sight. Mungo's eyes froze at the sight of the rifles they carried in the crooks of their arms.

He waited until they'd reached the first pair of hives he'd worked on. He yelled, "Hold it, Lich. What do you want?"

Lich checked his horse, and the herders reined up behind him. Mungo felt the force of Lich's scrutiny. Lich could see he wasn't armed.

Lich yelled, "My men say you deliberately killed my sheep from your side of the fence."

"They're damned liars," Mungo yelled back fiercely.

Lich moved his horse forward at a slow walk. He had nothing to fear; he was dealing with an old, unarmed man. "You're going to sell to me this morning, King. Or we'll run you off."

They were almost to the second pair of those six hives, and Mungo sucked in a deep breath. He saw a second plume of dust from beyond the bend in the lane, and he wondered who that was. But he couldn't think about it now. He had his hands full with Lich.

"Chet," he roared.

THE SECOND after his yell, seemed to last forever. He thought nothing was going to happen, and he felt a deep despair. He was ready to break for the house, when he saw one of the white box hives slowly topple over. The other five hives were falling, and he imagined he heard the little thuds as they hit.

The bees came out of the disturbed hives. They came out in small waving streams, looking like the first black, curling plumes of smoke from a new-

built fire. The plumes thickened into solid black clouds, and Mungo heard the angry, insistent hum. Lich had jerked his horse to a halt, and Mungo saw the startled surprise freezing his face. Then, the buzzing clouds were all around the horses and men, each cloud made up of hundreds of furious, venom-tipped insects.

Rifles dropped to the ground as the riders grabbed off their hats and flailed at the darting bees. Mungo heard the shrill, almost human sound of horses in panic. They reared and bucked wildly, and one of them kicked over another hive. Mungo retreated toward the house, a savage grin on his lips.

Lich bounced in his saddle like a sackful of meal, his mouth distended with his hoarse bellowing. Mungo saw the horse buck again, saw two feet of daylight between Lich and the saddle, then Lich was thrown heavily to the ground. One of the herders was down, and his horse bolted in wild fright. The other herder managed to stick on and turn his horse. He didn't have to use whip or spurs to get it out of there. The horse streaked away in panic, the herder flattened over its back.

The other herder jumped to his feet and ran down the lane, his head with both arms wrapped around it, bent far over on his chest.

Lich rolled over and over, threshing frantically with his arms. His yelling had a shrill insistent note, like the cry of an animal in pain.

Mungo flashed a look at the house. Martha stood on the porch, her eyes big. Chet stood as though frozen at the corner of the house, his mouth hanging open.

Lich had a terrible time getting to his feet. His weight and the effort of fighting off the enraged insects kept pulling him back to the dusty ground. He finally made it and started off on a blind, lumbering run, one arm covering his face, the other beating in wild, senseless strokes.

He blundered into a hive and fell over it, and the contents boiled out and joined the cloud buzzing and darting at Lich's head. Mungo's grin grew more savage.

"Mungo," Martha cried from the porch. "Get him out of there before he smashes all of your hives."

Mungo reluctantly gave up his pleasure. He raised his voice and yelled, "Lich, run for the house."

HE HURRIED into the kitchen and hastily put on his bee hat with its netting. He pulled on a pair of gloves, grabbed a towel, and was waiting when Lich came toward the porch in that blind, staggering run. Mungo reached out and pulled him up onto the porch. He flailed vigorously with the towel, dividing and driving the angry swarm a few feet away. Martha opened the door a crack, and Mungo shoved Lich inside.

Chet said in an awed voice, "Look at him."

Lich's face looked like a pincushion. Little, black stingers dotted his face, and it was swelling to a huge, inflamed mass. Already, the swelling had closed his eyes to slits, and Mungo knew that in a few more moments, Lich wouldn't be able to see.

Martha said severely, "Mungo," and it wiped the grin from his face. He looked at the dancing glint in her eyes. She wasn't upset with him. She said, "What did you do?"

He grinned like a small boy. "I just took a couple of the legs off those stands. I propped them up with short lengths of stick. Then, I tied cord to those sticks. When Chet pulled on those cords, it jerked the sticks from under the hives. All I had to do was to wait until Lich got right in the

middle of those hives. You know how bees hate to be disturbed."

Chet looked out the window and said, "Someone else is coming."

Mungo remembered that second dust cloud he'd seen. He slipped through a hastily opened and closed door, out onto the porch, and the angry bees were still there. He saw Pomeroy and three of his men coming down the lane. He yelled, "Look out for the bees. Swing away from the lane and come around to the back."

He was waiting at the back door when Pomeroy completed the wide circle of the house. "Lich knocked over some of my hives. He's inside."

Pomeroy's eyes were flinty. "He was supposed to wait for me. He sent word that you'd deliberately killed some of his sheep. King, I told you—"

"Come inside and ask him about it," Mungo cut him short.

Martha was pulling stingers from Lich's face and rubbing a liquid into it. Lich moaned and jerked, his fat hands waving helplessly.

Mungo said in a hard voice, "Lich, tell Pomeroy about those sheep." He waited a moment, then said, "Or do you want me to shove you outside again?"

LICH WAILED in a despairing voice, "We cut your wire. I was going to force you to sell. King, I promise you it won't happen again."

The flinty look in Pomeroy's eyes faded. He stared at Mungo and said, "It looks as though I was being used. What happened to him?"

Mungo said, "I guess bees just don't like him."

A slow grin started in Pomeroy's eyes. He walked over and looked down at Lich. He said flatly, "Lich, let Mungo King alone."

Lich made a whimpering assent.

Pomeroy grinned at Mungo, and there was respect and friendliness in his face. "Drop over and see me sometime." He nodded to his men and walked toward the front door.

Mungo said, "You'd better go out the back. They're still mad."

Pomeroy looked startled as he listened to the angry buzz coming from the porch. He looked at the screen, black with bees, shook his head, and walked out the back door.

Mungo raised his hand in a wave as they rode off. Chet came out and said in a small voice, "I don't guess Lich will be bothering us again."

Mungo's eyes gleamed. Chet had seen that respect in Pomeroy's eyes, too. No, Lich wouldn't bother them again. Pomeroy was a power in the valley.

Chet went on in that wondering voice, "You weren't scared. You were thinking all the time. A scared man don't think. I guess you settled it the best way."

Mungo felt the hope lump in his throat.

Chet said, "I didn't want old Lich getting our land. It's kinda nice here, Mungo."

Mungo carefully put his hands behind him. He didn't want the boy to see their trembling. He said gruffly, "I was hoping you'd see it that way."

He saw the maturity in Chet's face and was sorry it'd come so soon. A boy had too few years as it was before he grew up. Then, Chet's face broke into a wide grin, and laughter shook his body. He bent over, slapping his thigh again and again. "Did you see old Lich rolling around in the dust, beating at his head? Did you see him, Mungo?" he gasped.

Mungo grinned, but his eyes were stinging a little. That was a boy's laughter. Maybe he was wrong about Chet being completely grown up.

THE END

AN OUTLAW'S FINISH

By E. Bruce Yaches

THE HARD-FROZEN body had been found, with a bullet between the eyes, in a clump of sagebrush. An old man out hunting for prairie chickens had found it there, while searching for a bird he had shot. He rushed to the nearest residence, a brush shack half a mile away where lived two miners, John Franck and George Hilderman, and asked them to help him load the body in his wagon so he could take it into Virginia City. They refused, saying they didn't want to bother, and anyway, what was a dead body these days. Someone around Virginia City was getting killed every day, and what was it to them.

The old man managed the body by himself, and drove into town with it, where it was easily identified as Nicholas Thebalt, a simple young German boy. It was surmised that he had been murdered for two hundred dollars he was known to have received for the sale of a pair of mules.

The incident created quite a stir. It was 1863, and the place was Montana's booming Virginia City not long after the discovery of the rich gold fields there. There was no organized law as yet, and crime had indeed become a common thing around that district, but most of the miners were not so callous about it as the two men who had refused to worry about a corpse.

In fact, the miners began to wonder the ones who had committed the murder. They stamped angrily about in the cold December sunshine, inspecting the body, and growling that something ought to be done about it. A few of the more determined ones decided that something was going to be done, and arranged for a party to leave that night to hunt the murderers down.

Led by Cap Williams, a dozen or so hardy, well-armed miners rode forth. They timed their arrival so as to come upon the brush hovel at dawn, and they found half a dozen men there, sleeping on the ground wrapped in blankets. There were the men they sought, Franck and Hilderman. But Franck saw the deadly intent in the eyes of the posse, and he told them George Ives was the man they were after. Most of the men knew the tall, handsome Ives, who had been suspected of many robberies. He was arrested, along with the other two, and taken back to town.

It was arranged to have a trial in a few days time. Suspicions that the criminal element was well organized were increased, when four of the ablest lawyers around appeared to defend the accused men. The decent element who were prosecuting the case were hard put to find able legal counsel. Then Wilbur Fisk Sanders, a young man from Bannack, was persuaded to take the case. And so concerned and interested did the young lawyer become, that he went on to become one of the most courageous and determined members of the Vigilante organization which went into action following this trial.

THERE WERE hundreds of miners assembled on the day of the trial, which was held in the open despite the freezing weather, since there was no building around large enough to be used as a courtroom. Every man there seemed to feel it his privilege to have a say about the proceedings, and Ives' friends were vociferous in their demands. Almost a day was taken to arrange the form of the proceedings, and select a jury of twenty-four men. The courage of those who prosecuted this case was outstanding, for every man in the audience was armed, and no one knew how large or how powerful was the lawless element represented there.

For three days, the trial of George Ives continued, with the damning evidence piling up against him. The defense had nothing to offer, though it seemed they were doing their best off-stage as well as at the trial, for many wild rumors circulated through the inflammable crowd, calculated to make them doubt the motives of the prosecution, and the guilt of the accused.

December 21, 1863, the case went to the jury, who retired to a nearby store for only half an hour. The verdict was "Guilty"!

Sanders immediately made the motion that the guilty man be hanged, and hundreds of waiting miners clamored that the hanging take place at once. And it was done so swiftly that the friends of the prisoner had no time to arrange a rescue. By the cold light of the moon, the rope was prepared, and the convicted man placed upon a box. Then, Ives uttered the words which very soon all were to know as one of the passwords of the outlaw gang: "I am innocent."

The next words spoken were to become famous as the motto of the Vigilantes: "Men, do your duty!" A hundred guards lifted rifles to shoulders to prevent any last minute uprising of the criminals present, while the box was kicked from beneath the feet of George Ives. And so he died.

A short time afterwards, spurred on to action by the successful prosecution of this one criminal, their eyes opened by events of the trial to the power and extent of the lawless element with which they were faced, determined men formed the Vigilante organization. The Vigilantes hunted the criminals down, one by one. The death of the murderer, George Ives, was the first of a chain of executions which finally rid the area of road agents, robbers, and murderers.

"COPPER CANYON"

★ ★ ★

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Johnny Carter	**Ray Milland**
Lisa Roselle	**Hedy Lamarr**
Lane Travis	**Macdonald Carey**
Caroline Desmond	**Mona Freeman**
Lt. Ord	**Harry Carey, Jr.**
Theodosius Roberts	**Taylor Holmes**
Jeb Basset	**James Burke**
Bill Newton	**Bob Kortman**
Sergeant Joad	**Percy Helton**
Moss Balfour	***Francis Pierlot***
Bat Laverne	**Paul Lees**
Sheriff Elmo Wattling	**Philip Van Zandt**
Mullins	**Frank Faylen**
Henderson	**Ian Wolfe**

A Paramount Picture:

Produced by	**Mel Epstein**
Directed by	**John Farrow**
Original Story by	**Richard English**
Screenplay by	**Jonathan Latimer**
Release Date	**July 1950**

(Title and release date subject to change)

★ ★ ★

COLORFUL square dance sequences, heated gun duels, hard riding and pitched battles —all the excitement of the West and the post-Civil War drama of the feud between North and South, make Paramount's "Copper Canyon" a technicolor wonder.

Ray Milland, Hedy Lamarr, Macdonald Carey, Mona Freeman and

Harry Carey, Jr., are the main attractions in a rip-roaring film packed with action and suspense.

"Copper Canyon" is the story of a group of southern Civil War veterans who have migrated west, temporarily, until they mine enough ore to get enough money to rebuild their ravaged homes. The group encounters trouble when the northern smelter owner, Moss Balfour (Francis Pierlot), will only buy their ore on his own terms. The law, in the form of ruthless deputy sheriff Lane Travis (Macdonald Carey) and Bat Laverne (Paul Lees), refuses to come to their aid. Travis and the lovely adventuress Lisa Roselle (Hedy Lamarr) work for Henderson (Ian Wolfe) who is trying to gain control of the mines. Whenever the southerners try to carry the ore to another town, something happens to the wagons. The situation is so critical, that the men will soon have to sell their claims and leave town.

The southerners appeal to trick-shot artist Johnny Carter (Ray Milland), believing him to be the south's famous Colonel Desmond who, imprisoned during the war, escaped with $20,000 from the Union coffers. Carter denies he is Desmond and tries to stay out of the quarrel, for if identified as Desmond, he'll be faced with investigation from northern Lt. Ord (Harry Carey, Jr.).

Arriving in town with a travelling show, however, he changes his mind when Basset (James Burke), one of the southerners, and his two sons are shot in an unfair gun battle with Travis and his men. Roberts (Taylor Holmes), leader of the southern vets, with his daughter Caroline (Mona Freeman), widowed sister-in-law of the famous Desmond, calls a meeting. He plans to send a wagon train of ore to Mesa City, 30 miles away, heavily guarding the wagons, with Johnny leading. They agree to meet at midnight. Johnny never appears, but Travis and his men show up, having learned of the plan, and try to ambush the train. At the crucial moment, a masked Johnny saves the day by shooting down the attackers from a high vantage point, thus staving off disaster.

Johnny returning to his room, finds Lisa waiting for him. She unsuccessfully tries to pump him about the evening, then saves his life when Travis, armed, confronts Johnny as the masked attacker. That same night, Lisa tells Henderson she wants no more of the crookedness in Coppertown. He reminds her of various obligations she owes him—and that she can't walk out.

At Lisa's prompting, Johnny attends a gala dance the southerners are staging. Once there, he is lured outside and clubbed. Travis, himself, plants stolen money in Johnny's gun case, and later arrests him.

The next day, Travis closes Balfour's smelter and kills Balfour.

Johnny, meanwhile, freed with Lisa's aid, rushes to the Rainbow Saloon just in time to stop his southern friends from selling their claims. He and his followers then ride after Travis and, after a pitched battle, kill the badman.

Leaving the now peaceful Coppertown, Johnny and Lisa head for a life together in San Francisco. As they ride off, Johnny presents Lisa with $20,000—the one clue to his true identity.

AFTER A string of dramatic and sophisticated comedy roles, versatile Ray Milland returns to the Western, portraying his first hard-riding hero role in five years. As trick-shot artist Johnny Carter, Milland is rootin'-tootin' enough for the vigorous action scenes, and charming

enough to woo and win the glamorous Hedy Lamarr. His performance combines all the elements of the Western hero, with some of the gallantry of the post-Civil War era. Milland's return to the Western picture is indeed a happy event.

Playing the role of Lisa Roselle, a lovely, unscrupulous adventuress, Hedy Lamarr marks a milestone in her career. In her first Western, she portrays her part as the charmer who runs the town, with all the skill and glamour possible to evoke. Miss Lamarr steps into the Western medium with ease, and hands in a top-flight performance.

Macdonald Carey, as the ruthless Travis, adds to his long list of hits with an excellent characterization as the villain in the piece. Carey is a smooth menace, tricky, yet rough and tough at the right moments.

Mona Freeman plays her first full-fledged dramatic assignment like a seasoned trouper, as the young southern widow who falls in love with Lieutenant Ord, portrayed by Harry Carey, Jr., who follows his famous father's tradition as a highly competent performer.

An able supporting cast, including Taylor Holmes, James Burke, Bob Kortman and Frank Faylen, adds to the color and background of the plot, giving the picture a truly realistic western tone.

* * *

THERE WERE BIG doings at Paramount Studios the day I arrived to look over the make-believe town of Coppertown for *MAMMOTH WESTERN*. The big doings were promised by a crowded commissary, full of western-dressed actors and actresses, not to mention about twenty can-can girls and seventy street-dressed extras who were seated around the various tables. My lunch was finished when the young ladies—ruffles, silk stockings and all—arose from their tables in a body to start out for the movie sets. In the midst of them all, getting tidbits of information on the way, I went along, heading for Stages 12 and 14.

The huge door between these two stages had been removed, so that an entire town could be built on the combined sets. The girls with me went into the town proper on Stage 12, to the left, where there was a hotel, some stables, the exterior of a saloon, a blacksmith shop and a few houses. On this part of the set, the young ladies started to rehearse their numbers and actions.

Hedy Lamarr and Mona Freeman were on Stage 14, to the right. Stage 14 was an elongation of the western street with hitching posts and horses. At the end of it, though, where the shooting was actually taking place at the moment, was the interior of a large saloon.

Behind the bar, one prop man was polishing glasses and another was treating the glasses so that they would not have a shiny surface and cause glare. The treatment is an application of "glass dust".

About thirty cowboys and several saloon girls were seated at the tables, ready to gamble with poker chips and cards at the director's signal. Glasses of beer were placed here and there on the tables. Beer, of course, is nothing but cold tea. Sometimes, something a little stronger than cold tea is used—like ginger ale—as a change for the actor. When twenty or twenty-five "takes" are made, it is often wise for a director to see that his actors get a variety of beverages while all the time the audience believes that they are drinking beer. Real beer is taboo, of course, because of the Hayes-Johnston office. With real beer, after two or three drinks, some actors would not know what they were doing.

A black kettle, a smudge pot, was at the end of the bar, out of camera range. When the smudge pot works, coal or oil is used, and a special effects man waves a cloth over the smudge pot to cause smoke to disperse itself in the air. This is the smoke that represents the effects of cigars and hand-rolled cigarettes which must be found in a post-Civil War saloon. Again, although the actors are given real cheroots to smoke, they merely light the tobacco, while the special effects men prepare the room atmosphere to look as if they had been smoking all night.

WHILE THE camera crew was loading the camera with film, I walked over to Macdonald Carey, who was wearing a dirty red shirt, a sheriff's badge, no hat, jeans, and two guns in his belt.

"What're you doing in this picture, Mac?"

"Bernie," he said, "I'm a villain again. This makes the third time in succession. I played a heavy in 'Streets of Laredo' and 'Bride of Vengeance'. In this scene, I'm really a stinker. I shoot them in the back."

"Who do you shoot?" I asked. "Ray Milland?"

"No," said Mac. "He isn't even in this scene. He's in the next one. Ray's right over there, if you want to talk to him." Mac pointed to Milland at the back of the saloon, seated on a set chair, talking to Hedy Lamarr.

For her first western, Hedy was wearing a green, low-cut—and I mean low-cut—dress, and she was decked out on wrists and shoulders with jewels.

"Miss Lamarr is the owner of this here saloon," quipped Mac.

Milland was wearing a long black frock coat, with black trousers, a gambler's vest, and a dress shirt.

"How many pictures have you done since you came to Hollywood?" I asked him.

"Let's see," replied Milland. "This is about the 57th picture since coming over here in 1931. I'm grateful that my roles have been diversified."

"Which roles do you like best?"

"Well, I liked the role of the American army major who prosecuted a group of German war criminals in 'Sealed Verdict', the Devil in 'Alias Nick Beal', a college professor in the comedy 'It happens Every Spring', and the western hero in 'Copper Canyon'."

At this juncture, Miss Lamarr cut in: "He's a western hero in this one, and I gettim." They both laughed. "You can tell *MAMMOTH WESTERN* readers," Hedy said, "that this is my first western, and that I love it. It's fun. I want to do more of this kind of picture, particularly since it's in technicolor. I hope the studio finds me more of them."

Director John Farrow, a blond, majestic-looking gentleman, and a leading citizen of Beverly Hills, called attention, and the gang got ready to shoot the first scene. Hedy Lamarr took her place at the doorway.

"Action, camera," called Farrow, and Hedy rushed into the room. She was stopped by a heavy-set can-can girl. And that was the end of that piece of acting.

Next was the gun battle scene. Carey, who plays Lane Travis, crooked deputy sheriff who controls a small copper mining town, has been leading the fight to rid the town of a group of southern veterans of the Civil War. The southerners haven't been able to sell their ore to the Coppertown smelter, and when they try to carry it to another city, they always meet with accidents. Three men have already been killed in the struggle and James Burke, who plays Basset, has decided to have a showdown battle with Carey.

MAC IS talking to Lamarr and Milland, who is secretly aiding the southerners, in the Rainbow Saloon, when one of his men arrives to warn him that Basset and his two young sons are approaching the saloon.

Carey leaves the table and walks over to the bar.

An instant later, the saloon door is thrown open and Burke enters, followed by his two boys, eighteen and twenty. Burke carries a rifle and the boys wear revolvers. Burke halts a few steps inside the door, looks around the room. "Where's Travis," he asks.

"Right over here, Basset," replies Carey.

Burke and the boys walk slowly towards the bar. At the same time, people nearby start to take cover.

"I come to give you a warning, Travis," says Burke.

Burke and the boys stop twenty feet from Carey, who regards them with mild interest.

"If you ain't out of town by sun-up, I aim to hunt you down and shoot you with this here..."

He raises the rifle to demonstrate, and a shot comes from somewhere in the rear of the room. Burke staggers, mortally wounded. One of the boys draws his revolver, wheels to fire at the hidden marksman, but Carey draws and shoots him in the back. Two other men fire from concealed positions at the end of the bar, and the other boy falls.

"Cut!" shouts Director John Farrow. "That's it."

"Well, that should help our budget, John," grins Milland. "That's getting three actors off the payroll in a hurry."

NIGHTINGALE OF DODGE CITY

By Thomas Walker

"HE THAT is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," came the words in the solemn voice of the minister as he quoted the text for his sermon.

Below and directly in front of the pulpit lay the best coffin that the frontier town of Dodge City, Kansas, afforded. Inside was the remains of a beautiful woman. It was the funeral of Dodge City's greatest figure of glamour and mystery. Her name was Fannie Keenan, better known to Dodge City residents as "Dora Hand", the star entertainer at the Alhambra saloon and dance hall.

Dora Hand's previous history was shrouded in mystery and only one man, James H. Kelley, knew her past before her migration to the fair city of Dodge. James Kelley, more appropriately referred to as "Dog" Kelley because of a pack of hunting hounds given to him by General Custer when Dog was the General's orderly, was the first mayor of Dodge, as well as the half-owner of the high-class Alhambra. For some obscure reason, Dog absolutely refused to divulge the story of the early life of Dora Hand.

But some of the old-timers around Dodge City say that Dora was reared in a cultured Boston home, educated in music in far-off Germany, and that she had had success on the upper-bracket stages in the East. Dora had sung on the Comique stage with Eddie Foy, the famed comedian of that period.

There had been a strange, wild streak in Dora Hand, and it took her headlong down the roughshod path that eventually led to her destruction. She became a part of the seamy, sordid life on the western frontier, entertaining in the wild, untamed railroad and cattle-trail towns of that era—Abilene, Hays City, Dodge City. It was the violent era of the reckless, rowdy cowboy who, after months of the loneliness and hardships on the long cattle trails from the south, would come whooping and yelling into town, and usually "went the limit" in his search for fun and excitement.

Yet, Dora Hand, with all her wildness and waywardness, was always more than willing to sing at weddings, funerals or other righteous occasions. At which times, a more dignified or well-mannered woman could not have been found.

At the Alhambra, when it came time for her to sing, everything would grow quiet as her wonderful melodious voice filled the huge dance hall. The exquisite facial features and voice gave men strange nostalgic dreams of better days and finer surroundings. It has been stated that her winning charm was such that twelve men died for her smiles. That charm proved fatal to Dora Hand, also.

Trouble came riding into Dodge City in the shape of a swaggering, handsome cowboy from Texas. Jim Kennedy had come up the southern trail with a huge herd of longhorns from his father's immense ranch. Down in the state of Texas, Jim Kennedy's father, Mifflin Kennedy, was regarded as a cattle baron who lit his imported cigars with greenbacks. Young Jim was the type of spoiled rich man's son that thought he had to have whatever he took a fancy to—a fancy woman or flashy horse.

Jim Kennedy drifted into the Alhambra for refreshments. There, he fell victim to Dora Hand's glowing face and personality. He began paying ardent attentions to the singer, spending his afternoons and nights at the Alhambra.

Meantime, Dog Kelly began developing a slow burn over the affair. Dog resented Kennedy's too-passionate respects to his charming protege. His love for Dora was all consuming, and fireworks between the two rivals was unavoidable. One night, Dog decided he had had enough of Kennedy's nonsense, and proceeded to have his men bounce the young drover out on his ear. The handsome cowboy stood before the Alhambra and swore to kill the saloon proprietor for his maltreatment.

Dora Hand and Fannie Garretson, another of Dog's girl entertainers, were living in a flimsy, two-room shack owned by Kelley. Dora rented the front room and Fannie rented the rear one. In the early hours of the morning of October 8, 1878, the drunken Jim Kennedy crept silently up to this shack. The drunken avenger had his wires crossed. He thought that Dog Kelley was asleep inside the shack. The stillness of the early hours was shattered by two loud gun shots that Kennedy had fired toward the sleeping figure that he had mistaken for the mayor. One ball lodged in the flooring. The second passed over the bed occupied by Miss Garretson, ripped through the thin partition, and struck Dora Hand. Dora died instantly.

Jim Kennedy left town like a sinner from a revival meeting. He headed toward open country and the trail back to Texas.

The famous Wyatt Earp, then marshal of Dodge City, realized that Kennedy would undoubtedly do this very thing. Rounding up Bat Masterson and Billy Tilghman, two lawmen who later became famous in their own right, he hurried to a crossing on the Cimmarron River where he believed the sneaking murderer would eventually arrive. They had no sooner gotten set for a long wait, than Earp spotted Kennedy dusting across the prairie toward them.

"It's Kennedy, men," warned the tall, lean marshal. "Get ready."

Kennedy glimpsed the waiting lawmen and whirled his mount to race away.

"All right, boys, get his horse!"

Shots boomed out.

When the law officers rode up to the swearing cowboy, he spat, "Do what you want, but I'm glad I killed that damn Kelley, anyway."

One of Kennedy's arms hung limp from a bullet wound in the forearm.

Earp surveyed the belligerent youth as he drawled grimly, "Son, it wasn't Dog that you killed. It was Dora Hand."

The Texan was never convicted of the crime. His father had powerful connections in Texas, and Jim Kennedy was eventually saved through his family's money, and permitted to return to his home state.

The funeral of Dora Hand was the largest ever held in the frontier town. The cortege, as it moved up from Front Street toward the new Prairie Grove cemetery northwest of town, was made up of hundreds of mourners—cowboys, gamblers, dance hall girls, gunmen, business men, "respectable ladies" of the town, wealthy ranch owners, professional men. The elite as well as the off-scourings of the town paid homage to the dainty singer.

In 1912, at the Fort Dodge old soldiers' home, "Dog" Kelley died, taking Dora Hand's secret with him to the grave.

THE SNOWSHOE HORSE

By John L. Cooney

AT ITS best, freighting in the old West was tough. But it was during the winter that it became really brutal. For a number of years, the only form of transportation during the winter in many of the mountain regions was the ever-faithful snowshoe.

In 1858, however, one freighting company introduced dogsleds which proved quite successful. So successful, in fact, that the company's main competitor was almost forced out of business, and might have been except for a brilliant idea by a young blacksmith.

"If snowshoes are practical for humans," he reasoned, "why couldn't we make snowshoes for horses?"

At any other time, the idea might have been ridiculed. But the company was desperate. He was told to go ahead. The first snowshoes for horses weren't very successful. They were made of wood, but the snow stuck to them.

Iron plates, nine inches in diameter, were then tried with much better results. Other freighting companies were quick to adopt the idea, and in a few years, the snowshoe horse was a valued possession of the freighting companies that traversed the mountains.

Most horses cut themselves when first learning to use the snowshoes, and some never did learn to spread their feet to prevent the shoes from interfering.

WYOMING WILDCATTER

PROLOGUE:

IN THE YEAR 1888, blood poured red in Wyoming. Men bartered their lives and women their souls to dip their hands into the black treasure gushing up from the swollen earth. There it had lain, festering and changing, from the ages when dinosauria roamed the rocky, shadowy mists of time; when the bottomless

Larkin placed his hand against her midriff and shoved. She landed hard against the piano

By Harry Whittington

McCandless and Larkin formed a partnership to dig oil — but they didn't know that the business partnership would extend to their women as well . . .

canyons of now were shallow creeks lying helpless before the avalanches and glaciers, the eruptions and erosions, the fire and the cold.

There in the endless, rolling prairies of the Wyoming Territory, man took over nature's treasure to mold it to his own uses, and to be molded in turn to something far different from what he was in the beginning. Love became hate, and hate love, desire twisted itself into deception—for near Casper, they discovered the water tasted like oil, and now oil began to pour like water—blackening everything it touched. Poverty overnight became wealth. And in its turn, wealth became...poverty...

FRANK McCANDLESS moved through the crowds surging along the 500 feet of Casper's Main Street. From the lobby of the New West Hotel came the cry of the auctioneers, the shouts as minister vied with housewife for leases of land that lay fallow, flat and rocky some fifty miles away: that magic Salt Creek country.

The whole world had the fever. People unable to find housing, or to pay the exorbitant rents demanded, pitched their tents along Railroad Avenue. There were shortages in sugar. The grocers were rationing it, or selling it under the counter to those who could stand the tariff. People stood in line at the meat counters. No matter what the merchants charged, the people clamored to pay it. There was money in Casper, free-flowing money, oil money. But of that great wealth, Frank McCandless owned exactly one silver dollar. And this he flipped to decide whether he should spend it in the Golden Slipper at his left, or move to one of the other eight saloons on the clamorous street.

He caught the coin and unclenched his thick, calloused hand. His fingers loosened unwillingly, for McCandless had learned the hard value of a dollar. His corduroy coat and flat-crowned hat were caked with alkali dust. His threadbare pants were streaked with oil. He'd spent three months of sweat and toil to bring in a duster. He grimaced and shook his square-jawed head. He had poured his heart down that rat hole, and got back salt water with just enough oil in it to streak up his pants. Solid and heavy as a sack of silver dollars, he was all muscle, packed in skin taut as new leather. He'd shaved an hour ago, with hot water and a straight razor, but his jowls and chin were already shadowy and blue. He was young, ruggedly handsome. But he had had a hard existence that he'd met head-on in the scrupulously honest manner which was the only one he knew.

HE SCARCELY looked at the coin before he pocketed it. In his mind was a plan. A plan that would make him rich; allow him to stop nursing ever nickel he spent. Pushing through the batwings of the Golden Slipper, Frank McCandless admitted it: there was nothing in the world he'd refuse to do in order to get the money-stake he needed. There was great wealth in that land he'd leased. But he needed money he didn't have if he were to hold the lease, and more money to work it.

He closed his eyes for a second to the brilliance of the gaslights, and closed his ears to the laughter of the women. This was a sound that made him empty under the ribs, for McCandless was a lonely man, not made to live alone, either. He opened his eyes to the unfamiliar lights, but he kept his heart closed to the women. For he was an honest man, and the honest fact was: he couldn't afford one.

He crowded his way up to the bar and ordered a double bourbon. The bartender shoved bottle and shot glass at young McCandless. The thirsty man hesitated. He felt his dry gullet aching, his fingers trembling.

THIRSTY as he was, McCandless found his attention pulled to a gambling table near the wall. Every man in the room was watching it at one moment or another.

"Jericho Larkin is winning a fortune!" the man beside McCandless said.

His companion snorted. "Lucky at cards—and women. Look at Rocky Shaw leaning against Larkin's shoulder. The lucky younker—that redhead's trailed him all evening—and her who could have old Senator Carrington and all the money in the world just by snappin' her fingers."

"Yeah, but Carrington's almost sixty. His blood's too cool for Rocky! Oh, he wants Rocky all right. You ever see the way he looks at her? Like Rocky's watching young Larkin now!"

McCandless looked at Jericho Larkin—head back, laughing. All that money. Something inside McCandless ached at the sight of so much money. If I had that money, he thought covetously—pumps, cranes, winches, chains, flour and salt.

His attention was caught by the whispers on the other side of him. Three evil looking jaspers were talking together, their eyes hot on Larkin's growing wealth. McCandless smiled grimly. Between the lovely Rocky Shaw and the badmen, Larkin was going to have a fight on his hands tonight to keep the money piling up before him.

McCandless poured out the double measure. He closed his fingers about the small glass and hoisted it.

There was a shout of laughter, and before McCandless could save his drink, it had been knocked from his grasp to the bar.

The man next to McCandless snorted with laughter. Face flaming, McCandless wheeled. "Man, look what you're doing!" he raged. "Good whiskey!"

He glared into green, hard eyes. The green eyes looked him over and McCandless saw a tall man, wide-shouldered and lean as a winter coyote. The sort of devil-may-care hellion McCandless secretly envied, a man who laughed the same way in the presence of death or the face of a lovely woman. Qualities that McCandless knew he lacked.

"Sorry, partner. I was just backing away from the gambling wheel. When your luck's running like mine, you don't want to turn your back on a thing!"

EYES WIDENING, Frank McCandless stared at the paper money sprouting from the man's fingers, his pockets, from the flair-tipped collar of his white shirt. "You tipped my drink," he said. "You spilt it all!"

"Order up, sonny. I'll buy you ten just like it."

"Thank you, no. You just replace the drink you spilt—"

"To hell with that! You're drinking with me. Jericho Larkin's buying. This is my lucky night. But I'm always lucky when I gamble." The laughter slid from his face, his green eyes turned gall bitter. "But not with women. To hell with them. They shouldn't be allowed in a clean saloon. You stand a better show against a cold deck than matched with a sweet-smelling dame."

"Kind of bitter toward women," McCandless observed rather mildly.

"Never mind that, sonny. What're

you drinking?"

"I had a bourbon. But I can't drink with you. Just pay for the drink you spilt."

Larkin laughed. "All right!" He threw a greenback on the bar without even looking at it, the carelessness of the gesture digging like real pain inside McCandless' soul. The arrogant way Larkin spun away from the bar dared McCandless to mention change, even to speak his name.

From the raised stage at the end of the bright room, there came a fanfare. Holding his precious drink in both hands, McCandless turned to watch.

Up there in spangles and glittering jewelry, her red hair piled atop her head, stood Rocky Shaw. To woman-hungry McCandless, she was breath-takingly lovely, like something clean and fragile lost in here from the fresh soft night outside.

Piano and violin accompanied Rocky through a ballad. Eyes grew moist, big men cleared their throats. McCandless gulped his drink, keeping his eyes fixed on the lovely face through the swirling haze of smoke. The whiskey hit the pit of his empty stomach, and hit it hard.

He took Larkin's arm. "Man, if it's a gamble you want—a pot of gold—come in with me. I've an oil lease bursting with oil—"

"Who hasn't?" Larkin's bitter eyes were on the singing girl. "See that? That's what my money's buying me. One big night with Rocky Shaw!"

"Don't do it, man!"

Larkin's mouth twisted. "What do you mean don't do it? Why not?"

"That man Carrington—he might love her. She looks as good to me as she sounds. I never saw a finer looking girl."

Larkin's laughter was a growl. "Sure, she is. Spent her life in a Girl's Convent. I say she's for sale. She's already sold herself to Carrington. He's begging her to marry him. But everything I've got says she'll make a side deal with me."

BY NOW, Larkin had pocketed his winnings, but his clothing bulged with it. McCandless shook his spinning head. Larkin pushed through the crowd, McCandless followed.

They stood beside the piano. McCandless was thinking about the money he needed, but his gaze was on Rocky Shaw. He saw that her eyes moved over Larkin, and there was nothing casual in their smoky depths. He shivered.

"Don't throw that money away, man. I own a lease on oil land that'll make us both rich—"

"Sure, sure, everybody owns oil leases. I'm no oil man."

He put out his hand as Rocky Shaw finished her song. She closed her fingers over his and stepped lightly from the stage. Larkin found a table, ordered drinks for them.

"This is my friend. What'd you say your name was, friend?" Larkin grinned at McCandless.

"Frank McCandless."

"Yeah. Frank McCandless. He thinks I ought to sink my money in an oil well."

"Shouldn't you?" the girl said. "You've won a lot tonight."

"Everybody in Casper is buying oil wells," Larkin said. "I'm interested in something else."

McCandless watched the way Larkin's eyes went over the girl. The red head only tilted a little and she smiled.

"I'm interested in you, honey," Larkin continued. "I've got a lot of money to spend—if you'll spend it with me. When the night's over, what I have left is all yours. You never

rolled a sucker cleaner than I'll be."

For a moment, McCandless was sure he saw the glitter of tears in her eyes. "I never rolled a sucker," she said. "But you're not interested in that, are you?"

McCANDLESS watched Larkin shake his head negatively. The room was quieting, people were watching.

McCandless saw that her face was pale, and her eyes seemed to be going over Larkin's arrogant face seeking something—the answer to some riddle inside her, he supposed.

McCandless said anguishedly, "All that money, man! All in one night. It would make you rich."

Larkin didn't even look at him. "What's your answer, Rocky?"

"If you want me," she said softly.

McCandless' heart hit the empty place in his belly where the whiskey still burned. "No!" he blurted. "No! Such a waste! She's throwing away a chance to make a life for herself. You're throwing away a chance to be rich—and for what?"

Rocky hadn't spoken again. Larkin grinned. "Got a coin, McCandless?"

McCandless frowned. "I got a dollar."

"Then flip it. Oil means nothing to me. But neither does this..."

Rocky's whisper was tear-filled: "What's made you so bitter, Jerry?"

He ignored her. "Flip your coin, McCandless. Heads, you've got a partner. Tails, Rocky has..."

McCandless looked at the coin balanced on his stubby thumb. He steadied his trembling arm with his left hand and flipped. The coin caught the light, landed in his palm. He turned it over on the table. He inhaled deeply.

"Move your paw," Larkin said.

"It's heads," Rocky whispered.

Larkin looked at McCandless. "Shake, partner."

Rocky caught his arm. "Jerry, what about me?"

He looked at her casually. "You can go to hell, sister. The quickest way you can get there. Jericho Larkin's in the oil business!'

Rocky stood up. She had not noticed the way the room had quieted. The way all eyes were fixed on them. Larkin had shamed her before all of Casper—traded her on the flip of a coin. Her eyes flamed with the hatred smoldering in their murky depths. "You'll regret this, Larkin, as long as you live. You sold me out on the flip of a coin, but you couldn't buy me now with all the blood in your body! I'll get even with you if it takes to the longest day I live!"

LARKIN PLACED his hand against her open midriff and shoved. She landed hard against the piano. A discord went up to mix with the hoots of laughter. McCandless tried to let her see he was sorry, but her raging eyes followed Larkin across the room and out through the door....

Following Jericho Larkin out into the street, Frank McCandless puzzled. How could a man walk out on such a lovely girl? And what was the bitterness that stalked in Larkin's eyes?

Then he shrugged. Because Larkin had shoved Rocky Shaw aside, McCandless was getting another chance at that oil in the dark core of the earth.

Some uneasiness caused McCandless to turn sharply and peer over his shoulder. The three gunmen who'd been watching Larkin rake in the money all evening, now stood like vultures on the walk before the Golden Slipper.

McCandless fell into step with Larkin. They moved in silence up the lighted street. McCandless could feel

the dangerous presence of those killers close behind. He let his hand touch the gun at his hip. Eased the trigger back. He was willing to fight for this new partner of his; the man had money.

Darkness cast an ominous wall before them. McCandless saw Larkin plowing into it. From behind, he heard the sound of running feet. They were coming to overtake them in the darkness. And without looking, McCandless knew they were coming with guns drawn.

He pulled out away from Larkin. As he dragged upward on his gun and swung around, he saw a thing that he could never forget! Jericho Larkin spun suddenly, slapping himself against the dark wall. For a second, McCandless lost Larkin in the maw of blackness. He saw a silver flash, guns swinging up. Then, the night spurted orange. In the shattering thunder, McCandless saw Jericho Larkin's contorted face. Larkin's guns kept bucking, and one of the attackers pitched forward at the rim of the darkness. Another sagged and lost his weapon. The third fled howling.

Larkin didn't even look at the man he'd killed, or the one he'd wounded. He sheathed his guns wordlessly.

"And I thought I'd have to fight to save you," McCandless breathed. They started walking again. "You must have eyes in the back of your head, man."

Larkin growled, "I saw them watching me. I knew what they planned. You have to keep thinking to stay alive, McCandless.... Where is this worthless land of yours, partner?"

McCandless grinned in the darkness, and nodded. Perhaps a partner like this was what he needed to take oil from the earth. A man who thought fast and shot fast. Maybe they'd be rich. But, still, it was a strange partnership. In the end, greatness would go to the stronger. He smiled grimly and cut a glance at the wiry Larkin. There were different kinds of strength, and this business ahead would test them all.

THREE months later, Frank McCandless was in Casper alone. They were still fighting to bring in a gusher, and their money was gone. It was hellish luck. They were boring down through rock petrified a million years. There was the feel of oil, an electric tension in the air. Jericho Larkin neither ate nor slept. He was now possessed of the oil fever, as even Frank McCandless had never been consumed.

Striding along Casper's Main Street toward the brokers' offices in the New West Hotel lobby, McCandless smiled. The man Larkin had worked like a hellion from the first day. No man could say that either of them poured more of his heart into that barren place where camp buildings, derrick, machine shop and storage tanks mushroomed in that eternal hope that keeps men breaking their backs at the pumping stations.

He shook his head. This Jericho Larkin was a strange man. Walking out on the lovely Rocky Shaw that night three months ago. Killing a gunman in the street and not even stopping to look at the devil's face. Three months now, and McCandless knew nothing about Jericho Larkin except the little he had been able to guess. Larkin was running from something, McCandless was sure of that. Larkin was bitter, hated women. When they came into town, Larkin gambled, always a woman or two made a fool of herself over him before the night ended. But Larkin held himself aloof in a way that chilled you. McCandless decided that Larkin hated some one woman so deeply that he hated all women along with her.

FRANK McCANDLESS saw her first as she stepped off the stage from Orin. He stopped and stared. There was a crowd around the travel station, and among them she was a jewel catching the flame of the brilliant sun. She was blonde as a sun-goddess, her pastel-green dress billowing from full bosom and trim waist. But it was her eyes, searching the crowd, that caught at McCandless.

Her eyes brushed across McCandless, paused, moved on. But the excitement McCandless felt didn't leave him, and he kept looking back as he continued toward the hotel.

Angie Dennison searched the faces of the people around the stage office. She was seeking Jerry Larkin, and her wish made her sure he'd be there in the crowd.

Her blue eyes clouded with disappointment, and she stirred impatiently. It had been so long since he had held her in his arms. Not quite so long since she'd betrayed him. He had been such a fool about the whole thing. After all, she was a married woman, and no woman will willingly wreck her marriage, even to save such a rare devil as Jericho Larkin. But now that the marriage was wrecked, there was no longer anything to stand between them—except his old hatred. And Angie Dennison was not a woman who feared to stack her lithe charms against an old hatred.

She would never have located Jerry Larkin except for the letter from Senator Farley Carrington. A leading figure in the legislature at Cheyenne, Senator Farley Carrington had been a friend of Angie's family since her childhood. He had been a friend of her legislator husband's, too. He had written inviting her to Casper to visit the senator's new wife, Rocky.

At first, Angie had scoffed at the idea. Why, the senator's wife was nothing but a common singer from a saloon. Except for his casual mention that the young hellion Jericho Larkin was now in Casper, Angie would have torn up his letter and forgotten it. But the senator had mentioned Jericho, and Jericho's partnership in an oil well. The combination had determined Angie. She'd accepted the senator's invitation by return mail, and followed the letter on the first stage north from Cheyenne.

SHE SAW the senator and his gaudy young wife standing back in the shade. Angie smiled warmly at them.

Senator Farley Carrington came forward, a small foppishly dressed man with a large head, thick gray hair and brown, steady eyes. Angie frowned, looking at him. He carried himself as proudly as ever, but there was a look about him of incredible unhappiness. Her eyes slipped to the girl idling in the shade. What sort of life did the fifty-eight-year-old man have with his saloon bride?

Carrington bowed over her hand. "So glad you could come, my dear. I'm sure, Angie, that getting away from Cheyenne will help you forget the unpleasantness of your divorce from Chester."

Angie who had long since gotten over the unpleasantness of her divorce, smiled wanly. "It's all like a nightmare to me, Senator," she sighed.

He led her across the walk to Rocky. Carrington was unaware of the way the two women measured each other, like antagonists in a prize ring. The senator was so deeply in love with his wife that he scarcely saw any other woman.

"I want you both to be friends," he was saying. "By the way, Angie, Rocky had planned a gala ball for you as soon as you're settled. We're inviting the best people of Casper, of course. And the most interesting."

"Will you ask Mr. Jerry Larkin?"

Angie inquired softly of them.

She heard Rocky's sharp intake of breath, and for an instant, their eyes clashed.

"Hardly," the senator assured her. "He's hardly acceptable. But he's very infrequently in town, anyway. He spends all his time at the well that he and his partner own."

The senator assisted them into his carriage. There was a tension between her and the senator's wife, Angie realized. What can Jerry Larkin mean to her? She looked at Rocky again. Rocky was a gaudy redhead, but Angie was positive of her own charms in any competition. Besides, there was nothing she wouldn't do to get Jerry Larkin and a wealth in oil.

Their carriage moved through the streets where log cabins and frame shacks butted against the newest brick buildings. Casper was growing lustily, bursting at the seams, with lumber stacked along the street, tents thrown up in uncleared lots. Crossing the railroad tracks, they turned on an oil-paved street lined with poplars and the huge homes of Casper's wealthy.

The senator's three-storied brown frame home boasted scrolls and gingerbread from the fashionable east. Carrington helped them from the carriage. "We want you to call it home, Angie, as long as you like."

SHE FOUND the inside as elegantly furnished as any in Cheyenne. With contempt, she watched Rocky move in boredom through it. The little fool had no idea of all she possessed.

Servants preceded Angie up the stairs with her trunks. She was on the lower step when the doorbell chimed loudly. The senator himself opened it. At the door stood the husky Scot Angie had idly noticed at the travel station. Received without any especial warmth by the senator, he entered the foyer, hat in hand.

Angie saw that Rocky, standing in the door of the library, was watching the visitor closely. Eyes narrowing with interest, Angie waited, hand on Newell post.

McCandless came at once to the point. "I've been to every broker in town, Senator. It doesn't take those men long to say no, does it? Sir, we've got a well out there just aching to burst loose. A few more dollars and—"

"You want a loan, McCandless?" the senator looked pained.

"Yes. A short term one, sir. With interest to suit you. We've got it by the tail, Senator, and we can't go wrong. Unless we can't get the money to finish what we've started!"

"I never lend money on wildcat schemes," the senator declared coldly. "As you must know, I am backing a bill in the Legislature at Cheyenne outlawing these wildcat oil drillers who are making things so evil for legitimate oil businesses."

"I know all about that," Frank McCandless replied evenly. "And I know, too, that you're a principal stockholder in Great Western Oil. But I'm offering ten per cent interest. And if we fail to bring in oil on your money, I'll turn the leases over to your company. I know you want that."

McCandless could see the greed working in the senator's unflinching brown eyes. He smiled grimly. Actually, McCandless knew, he had no right to make any such deal. He owned nothing of the wells, since Larkin's money had bought equipment and paid the leases. There was no agreement written between McCandless and Larkin. Only a spoken acknowledgment, signed by a nod of their heads the night McCandless stood ready to risk his life to save Larkin's in the streets of Casper. It was a strange partnership. Born in a saloon, made between men so op-

posite they were natural enemies. Yet, McCandless was at peace. He knew Larkin would support any contract he made here tonight.

Before the senator could answer, Rocky moved from the door of the library. Frowning, McCandless watched her touch Carrington's arm.

"Don't say no to Mr. McCandless, dear, without thinking it over. You know I never try to influence you in things like this, but at least wait until after the party for Angie on Friday." She looked up into McCandless' face with a bright smile. "Why don't you and your partner come to our party? Senator Carrington will have had time to study the matter from all angles by then...."

McCandless, agreeing to attend the party, left the house elated. Larkin must still have some hold on Rocky Shaw Carrington. McCandless felt the senator had been about to accept the exorbitant terms he had proffered. Perhaps Rocky could get the money for them more reasonably. He mounted his horse at the livery, and rode hard across the flat plains toward the Salt Creek country where Larkin awaited him.

SENATOR Farley Carrington, standing at his bedroom window, watched the patterns of the poplar on the glass pane. Sipping his Scotch from a small glass, he stared out across the night as though he could see the rocky land of the oil country fifty-odd miles through the Wyoming darkness. He heard Rocky enter his bedroom and softly close the door behind her. Surprised, he turned, brow tilted sardonically, and regarded his redheaded wife in her diaphonous dressing gown.

"This is indeed a surprise and a pleasure," he said wryly. "To what do I owe this visit? Are you afraid our guest might think it strange, a new wife treating her husband so coldly?"

Eyes slumbrous, sensuous red mouth smiling, she slowly crossed the room to him.

The senator felt his pulses quicken. No man ever loved a woman as he loved Rocky, he told himself. His desire for her transcended everything else in his life.

"I wanted to thank you," she murmured silkily.

The senator felt a touch of chill. "Thank me?"

"For not agreeing to lend money to Frank McCandless."

He did not smile. "That was business, my dear. And I don't approve your attempting to dictate my moves, although I bowed to your wishes earlier tonight. Of course," his mouth twisted bitterly, "I think I've guessed the truth. You're still infatuated with that Larkin. You think to use your wiles on me to secure him a better deal. Isn't that true, Rocky, my dear?"

Her nearness assailed him. With trembling fingers, he set the thin glass down hard on the table. The glass smashed; he didn't even glance at it.

"You're wrong," she whispered. "Of course you're wrong. Don't you know that when Frank McCandless agrees to gamble on anything, it's no gamble? Do you believe that man ever gambled on anything? Oh, you might have gotten ten per cent from them for a short term. But when McCandless is sure enough to gamble, you can know they're about to bring in oil."

Carrington smiled, puzzled and proud.

"Why take ten per cent?" she persisted, "when you can take it all? Wait, Farley. Refuse them money. Everyone else has. They can't hold out. You can take over then, with the oil waiting to burst from the pipes.

And as to why I'm here, I'm here to stay, Farley. I'll be the kind of wife you want. I'll do anything for you. All I ask in return is that you smash Jericho Larkin. That you smash him, without mercy!"

ANGIE DENNISON, laughing, danced with every attentive man in the bright room. The ball given in her honor by Senator and Rocky Carrington was a breathless affair, even for Angie who was accustomed to Cheyenne's glittering parties during the political season. The senator's matched anything she'd ever seen. He himself had taken a sudden, bright interest in everything. Angie remembered he'd seemed bitterly unhappy the day she'd arrived. Yet, he'd poured thousands into this party to assure its lavish success. Added to that for Angie, was the fact that she was going to see Jericho Larkin again for the first time in over a year.

She watched every new arrival. Yet, when Larkin arrived with his partner, he was not as Angie remembered. There was a bitter set to his mouth, his eyes looked dry and tired. There was no tailored flash to the cut of his clothes, as there had been in the days when he'd been the most eligible young bachelor-lawyer in Cheyenne.

Angie stopped dancing with the stout banker, stood watching Larkin bowing politely over Rocky Carrington's hand. Angie was aware that Larkin must still hate her for what she'd done to him. She smiled. When she was alone with him, let him know she was divorced from Chester Dennison, she'd have what she wanted—Larkin's arms about her again.

She excused herself absently and left the frowning banker on the floor. Her eyes met Larkin's. She put out her arms so he'd see she wanted to dance with him. Purposely, she lifted them so Larkin would know her arms and heart were open to him.

He stepped forward, his face darkly angry. They danced, with Angie's heart beating in time with the lilting waltz music. With strong purpose, she forced their steps toward the door to the senator's private den.

WITH THE door closed behind them, Angie pressed herself sensuously against him. Her lips parted, and the tip of her tongue trembled between them. Larkin thrust her from him.

"Still looking for thrills, Angie?" he inquired. "Still lying to get out of trouble?"

"All that's past, Jerry. Please. That's gone from between us now. Chester divorced me right after your trial. For a whole year, I've done nothing but look for you. I want to tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you."

"Hurt me?" His eyes regarded her incredulously. "You left me to hang, Angie. Do you think I'll ever stop hating you? You could have spoken up. You could have told the Court that you followed me to my hotel, that you were with me in my room at the very moment Evan Lesdermin was killed."

She dragged down on his hands, trying to insinuate her body against him. Unsure of her arguments, she was confident of her charms.

"I felt Chester would kill me if he knew the truth," she whispered placatingly. "I wanted to help you, but I couldn't. Anyway, when you told the truth in court and said I was with you, Chester believed you, even when he lied under oath and swore I was with him all evening." She laughed, remembering. "I had him so drunk when I left him, he didn't know where I was. But when the trial was over, he divorced me."

Larkin laughed shortly. "Good for Chester. I didn't think he'd have guts enough to take such positive action. Well, it's over now, Angie. Drake admitted killing Lesdermin, and I was freed—two days before I was to hang. No, I'm sorry, Angie. When you've come that close to the gallows, you can't ever forgive the woman who sent you there."

She spoke hotly, her mouth close against his throat, her body pressing him backward: "You love me, Jerry. You know you do. I'm in your blood. I'm your kind."

"You're in my blood," he admitted. "But God help me, rotten as I am, I'm not your kind."

"Listen to me, Jerry. I happen to know Farley Carrington isn't going to lend you the money you need. I overheard him talking with Sheriff Lindsay Bridges. He's planning to take over your leases and foreclose you. I've the money, Jerry. I'll give it to you, if you'll marry me." She snuggled against him. "After all, with you rich in oil, I'd be an oil queen, wouldn't I?"

"An oil queen now, is it?" He stepped back, mouth twisting. "I think you lie about Carrington. And as for your being an oil queen, here's something to wear in your crown."

BEFORE she could move, he backhanded her across the face. Wheeling about, he left the room, closing the door hard. For a long time, Angie stood there. Her face bore the livid mark of Larkin's brutal hand. Tears stung her eyes. Her full bosom heaved with anger, an anger that gave way to despair. But she was too young and too beautiful to remain despair's victim for very long. She straightened her hair, blinked away the tears, and lifting her golden head high, came through the door to the brilliantly lighted ballroom.

She almost bumped Senator Carrington and Frank McCandless entering the den for a private confab.

McCandless stared. Never in all his life had he seen such a lovely creature. He knew now that when redheaded Rocky had seemed beautiful to him in the Golden Slipper, that had been his starving need for a woman speaking. But with Angie Dennison, it went deeper. She was intended for him by God's design, he was sure, since time began.

He wondered at the hurt in her eyes. A moment ago, he'd seen Jericho Larkin striding from this room. It seemed unlikely they'd know each other. As for the senator, he saw the hurt, too, but he would never repeat the rumors he'd heard about Angie and Larkin, not even for political reasons. It violated his code.

As he waited for the senator to pour drinks, McCandless thought about Larkin. There must be some explanation for his bitterness toward all women. McCandless shook his head. Larkin was a strange one. Tonight, riding in from the Salt Creek country, they'd come upon a twenty-mule wagon train stuck in the mire and abandoned. Larkin had stared covetously upon the pipes and winches and chains they needed so desperately. McCandless told Larkin that robbing a mire wagon train was beneath even a horsethief's dignity. Larkin, laughing, shook his head. "But not mine!" he had said. "I take what I need." His attitude was so far removed from McCandless', the Scot wondered again how they worked so well together!

HE FINISHED off his glass of whiskey. There was going to be no stealing. Looking at the senator, he waited.

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you," Carrington said blandly. "I've

inquired around. You personally are reliable enough, McCandless. But you're broke. Your partner is a renegade. He was in trouble in Cheyenne, was almost hung. He's a gambler, a drifter, and maybe worse. His word on a mortgage wouldn't mean much to me. I'd like to help you. But I'm afraid the answer is no."

"Twenty per cent interest," McCandless whispered, trying to hide his panic.

The senator hesitated, shook his head. "Everyone in town has refused you," he said. "I'd be a fool. Larkin might walk off with everything—"

McCandless set his glass down hard. "Larkin is my partner. Keep your money, Senator. We'll make out somehow. But next time we meet, remember that Larkin is my partner. When you slander him, you're slandering me!"

For a moment, their eyes met. McCandless fought down the empty panic that assailed him. The senator was his last hope. And he couldn't overlook the smile of confidence in the senator's brown eyes, like a vulture hovering over a sick thing, waiting for it to die....

They rode swiftly through the night together. They had not spoken since they pounded out of the senator's yard. There was no need for words, McCandless knew, no more to be said. Larkin knew as well as he that they were beaten.

Larkin had been dancing with Rocky when McCandless left Carrington. McCandless, pushing through the dancers, touched Larkin's shoulder. Briefly, he'd told Larkin that Carrington had refused the loan. They'd left the party then without even saying goodnight to the smiling hostess.

The country about them was changeless in the brilliant moonlight. One small hill swelled into one rise after another. They kept just off the road. It'd been churned by the tortuous passing of the mule trains on their interminable passage between oil country and the railroad at Casper. Four wagons coupled together, hauled by sixteen to twenty animals, brought supplies to the fields, returned with oil. In good weather, making ten or twelve miles a day, the skinners swearing and cracking whips over the sweated animals.

HEAD LOWERED, McCandless studied those deep ruts. As though reading his thoughts, Larkin growled, "Forget it, McCandless. I could rob that wagon ahead there, and forget it over a glass of whiskey. Your honest mind would go insane."

"Sometimes," McCandless replied softly, "a man's got to be honest with himself—at a loss to others."

"I said forget it," Larkin snarled. "Don't let me drag you down to my level. It's better we break off now."

"I'm not asking you to go with me," McCandless said. "Though I admit I could use some help getting that rear wheel out of the mire."

Riding side by side, they faced each other. In the brilliant moonlight, McCandless saw Larkin's grim smile. In accord, they slipped handkerchiefs across their faces, pulled down their hats. Their eyes remained in darkened slit.

The mule skinners were singing and talking around a campfire, too lazy to work in the mud, the dray animals ground-tied in the short grass. The two men rode in upon them, guns drawn.

"Who's in charge here?" McCandless said.

A burly muleskinner, body bared to the waist in the chill night, stood up. "I am," he declared. "And this load's consigned to Great Western Oil."

"We're changing that," McCandless said. "Step, you men. My partner will stand by while two of you hitch the horses back at the shafts. The other two will unload that wagon. Move!"

McCandless stood with guns ready while the cursing muleskinners unloaded the rear wagon and put their shoulders to the mired wheels. Larkin cracked the whip over the straining animals. The mire sucked, pulling at the wheels. McCandless watched the legs of the skinners go down knee deep before the wagon inched forward from one mire pit to another. And then it was free. Larkin joined McCandless while the four men reloaded the rear wagon.

"Now, I must ask you to remove your boots, though I hate to," McCandless said. "Moving this train will be slow. I want to be sure you don't reach Casper in too big a hurry, either."

The big muleskinner roared, standing barewaisted and barefooted. "Don't worry. I'll get you for this. I'll bring a sheriff and a posse, and we'll hang you high!"

Larkin laughed and saluted him. "Come armed," he advised mildly.

The wagon train moved forward under Larkin's whip. Now that the robbery was in progress, McCandless began to be sick. His honesty had never made him rich. But at least, he thought, I've always been able to live with myself. He growled. He wished for the conscience of Larkin, so that the thing would not matter. Sometimes, dishonesty took a heavy toll in strength. This robbery had cost Larkin nothing. But it had taken all the courage in McCandless' heart, and it left him feeling unwholesome and dirty.

THERE was a narrow, rocky street between the tarpaper shacks where the partners and their laborers lived. It wound past machine shop, grub tent, storage tank, upward to the unpainted wood derrick. That derrick was the end of the road at the Whiskey Jack Oil Well; it was the summit of their hopes. It was a cluttered, interminably busy place in the shadeless day. Along it in a hired surrey, Frank McCandless drove his wife proudly one morning two months after the night of the senator's ball.

Angie McCandless stared with unconcealed horror at this sunbaked place where McCandless had brought her to live. She began to have her doubts. Even living here near Jerry Larkin was going to be more than she'd bargained for when Frank McCandless asked her for the dozenth time in two months to be his wife.

Admittedly, she didn't love Frank McCandless. He'd courted her persistently while he was in Casper on political business. Something about electing Larkin to the legislature. But she was hardly aware of McCandless, except as the oil-smelling man who was Jericho Larkin's partner in the new gusher that was the talk of Casper—the first really huge well in Wyoming's history.

Frank McCandless stood up and whooped. Men heard him over the sound of the pumps. Turning, they stopped work to stare. At the grub tent, McCandless halted the horses. Face beaming, he demanded of the Chinese cook where Larkin was hiding.

They found Larkin in the drably furnished shack they'd built for their office. McCandless, arm about her shoulders, ushered Angie in proudly. He felt her shiver. He told himself he realized the abhorrence she must feel for the dirt and the ugliness. Things wouldn't always be like this. He'd build her a home finer than Senator Carrington's in Casper.

Larkin was bent over the oil-smeared ledger. When McCandless spoke, the wiry young giant stood up, the warm smile dying chilled on his face.

"You know Angie," McCandless said grandly.

Larkin nodded coldly. "I know her."

"WE'RE married!" McCandless announced. He had never known it would be so difficult to control his exuberance. The two simple words seemed to sing out of him, he was that happy.

It was very silent in the shack. McCandless' square face was wreathed in a smile that wouldn't lessen. He looked down at Angie's golden face. Except that she was slightly pale, she'd never looked lovelier.

"I hope you'll be very happy," Larkin said. He shook hands with McCandless. McCandless noticed the stiffness of the handclasp. He frowned. Larkin brushed past him and left the shack. McCandless looked at the door, and then at Angie.

She smiled wryly. "He doesn't seem very pleased, does he?" she said.

It would have taken more than Larkin's coldness to spoil this night, McCandless assured himself. And yet, even when Angie was asleep, her head on the pillow beside his, the young Scot found sleep elusive.

Quietly, he stole from the bed. The room was cold. Dressing quickly, he sought in his mind some explanation for Larkin's strange behavior.

Larkin was not in his shack. Shrugging his great coat up on his shoulders, McCandless trudged along the narrow company street, stepping carefully, avoiding chug holes and jutting rocks that hadn't yet been cleared away. There was so much that should have been done, McCandless knew. But they hadn't found the time. First, the gusher had come in, rich beyond even his wildest dream. He shook his head. And such a moment it chose to come in!

Moving along the rough company street, with the derrick silent and dark at its summit, McCandless smiled. Sheriff Bridges and the big muleskinners had arrived the second day after McCandless and Larkin had robbed the mired freighter. Working frantically, they'd unloaded the four wagons and started the team with empty trucks back along the rutted road toward Casper.

He smiled. What an accomplished thief I've become. How I've changed from the honest, penniless McCandless who never took a loaf of bread not his own. The desire for oil had done that, for he hadn't even hoped to be able to fool the sheriff. And when Sheriff Bridges and the posse arrived, the new material gleamed in the sun. Beautiful, guilty stuff, already hard at work sucking oil from the earth in the name of McCandless and Larkin.

Bristling with arms, the posse rode up the company street. His heart chugging like the working pumps, McCandless stood with partner and laborers, waiting. "You're accused," the sheriff began, "of the lowest theft—robbing a mire freighter between here and Casper. You are under arrest. Both of you."

McCANDLESS had been speechless. But Larkin spoke: "I'm afraid you'll have to prove your allegations, Sheriff. We're at work here. We don't intend going with you, even if you've warrants, unless you can prove one piece of this machinery belongs to Great Western."

A howl had gone up from the Great Western men at that. Muleskinners and oil men leaped down, searching

for the stencilled name on the machinery. But it was gone, rubbed away with sand and stone all through the night by Larkin and the cook.

"We'll take 'em by force, Sheriff!" A Great Western man raged. The sheriff nodded, bringing up his gun. McCandless hesitated. But Larkin lunged at the law man. The sheriff's gun exploded. His horse reared, slinging the stout sheriff to the hard ground. Larkin was on him at once. Laborers and muleskinners ran at each other like snarling wolves.

And at that moment, a horrible hissing, twisting sound, like a tornado in helpless trees, boiled up from the bowels of the earth. And the gusher came in!

Fight was forgotten. Theft was forgotten. Every man, enemy and laborer alike, fell to conquering the biggest gushing of black oil in Wyoming to that moment. Pouring and spewing forth it came. Black, beautiful. The top went off the derrick. Tools and equipment were hurled into the air. With tears black on his face, McCandless fell to work shoulder to shoulder with the Great Western man.

Now, McCandless was laughing at that memory as he went through the laborers' tents. Larkin had not been in the camp. McCandless woke the cook. "When morning comes, tell Mrs. McCandless not to worry. I've gone out to seek Jericho Larkin. We'll be back tomorrow sometime."

The streets of Casper were still blazing with life when McCandless loped into town. Hitching his sweated horse before the first saloon, he worked them all. Yes. Larkin was in. But he was gone. No. None had any idea where he might be found.

Any man but McCandless would have given up before dawn. It was in the mellow orange glow of false morning that McCandless located Larkin. In the dingy lobby of the Settler's hotel, he read a name, John Smith and wife. But he had seen too much of Larkin's writing in the past year not to recognize it.

ON THE second floor, McCandless banged at the door. Larkin's drink-sodden voice answered finally. McCandless smiled as he heard scurrying footsteps. "Mrs. Smith is hiding in the closet," he thought.

Finally, Larkin opened the door. Eyes puffed and red, dark hair over his forehead, he hung loosely to the door. "What you want?"

"You're coming back to camp with me," McCandless said.

"What makes you think so?"

McCandless stepped into the room, closing the door. He shoved Larkin to the bed. Sprawling there, the tall man looked up at him. McCandless ignored the movement in the closet.

"Listen to me!" McCandless was aware of the Scot burr which made his voice thick in moments of stress. "What you do—who is there in that closet—is no concern of mine. But this is: that for two months now, I have slaved to get you elected to the Legislature in Cheyenne. Our future, and the future of every little oil man in this territory depends on what you do against Senator Carrington's tariff and freight bill. Now, you suddenly run drunk and disorderly through every saloon in Casper. What's the matter with you, man? Do you think even our friends will elect a sot to the Legislature?"

As they left th room, McCandless put a ten-dollar bill on the mantle—for the lady in the closet, he smiled wryly.

He poured black coffee down Larkin, working over him until Jericho was able to sit in a saddle. Larkin was deeply silent as they returned along the rutted road to the camp.

The cook ran to meet them at the edge of the diggings. "McCandless, sir, and Mr. Larkin, three important gentlemen from Great Western. In your office. Three hours they wait!"

McCandless spurred his horse up the rocky incline. Warmly, he noted Larkin at his side. At least they were united when their partnership was threatened.

The Great Western men made no move to shake hands. "We know," said their lawyer, "that you men robbed us of four wagon loads of equipment two months ago. Senator Carrington reveals you requested a loan from him at twenty per cent interest. Although that request was denied, we have now agreed that the stolen shipment, amounting to ten thousand dollars, constitutes a loan from the Senator and Great Western Oil—at twenty per cent interest. The rate you agreed to, Mr. McCandless."

McCandless felt Larkin's eyes on him. "You agreed to that?"

McCandless nodded. "He had us over a barrel, Jerry. I knew the gusher would come in. I thought it a short term loan."

Larkin nodded. "All right then, McCandless, I stand behind you." He faced the Great Western men. "We'll make that loan good."

"At twenty per cent interest."

McCandless slumped in a chair as the three men left with Larkin's first check. When they were gone, Larkin looked at his doleful face and laughed. "Stop worrying!" he commanded. "They could have hung us for that just as easily, you know."

McCandless stood up. He put out his hand. "Thanks, Jerry. I was worried when you took out for town and got drunk. You think I was wrong to marry Angie. She's my whole life, Jerry. I hope you'll see it that way. I want you and Angie to be friends, Jerry. You're the two people who mean the most in the world to me."

ANGIE McCANDLESS, standing beside Jerry Larkin in the crowd before Casper's band stand, smiled. Up on the platform, torchlights flickering brightly across his sweated face, Frank McCandless shouted in Larkin's behalf.

Although she'd been married to Frank for a month now, she'd never before been really aware of him. She frowned. It was odd she'd now be thinking of Frank. It was also the first time she'd been this near to Jerry Larkin since the night of the senator's party.

It was the night before elections. An election that excited even Angie, long bored with politics. Great Western Oil's candidate represented money interests: cattle, railroading, oil. If elected, he'd be with Senator Carrington from Natrona County in the legislature at Cheyenne. There'd be no protest vote against the Senator's bills outlawing wildcatters in the interest of conservation, or the tariff bills making oil shipments prohibitive to the little oil men.

The Scot burr in McCandless' voice was never more evident. His sincerity went all through you. You knew McCandless was truthful, that unless the young lawyer Jerry Larkin was elected, little oil men would be driven from the Salt Creek fields. "The hopes of all of us go with Jerry Larkin to Cheyenne."

Angie felt her eyes fill with tears. McCandless really believed in his partner. But Angie realized a greater truth. It was a brave and selfless thing Jericho Larkin was doing. For Angie knew she'd involved Jerry in a terrible scandal, let him go to the shadow of the gallows in Cheyenne, because she'd lied. Larkin's law practice had been ruined, his good name

gone when he'd fled from Cheyenne. Now, for these little people who needed him, Jerry Larkin was returning to face scorn and derision, the gossip and ugly rumors that would greet him in his old home.

SHE LIFTED her tear-brimmed eyes to the firelight on her husband's face. Such a strange pair to be partners. No more opposite men ever lived. And yet, together, she knew them unbeatable.

Angie shivered. She also knew she was the one thing in the world that could ever come between them....

She let her eyes roam as she listened to the Scottish voice. There, back in the shadows at the edge of the crowd, she saw Senator Farley Carrington.

She stared, astonished. She'd not seen him in a month, but was a month time for such a tragic change in a man?

She dragged her eyes away. She found herself shivering again, even in the tightly packed crowd. She drew close to Larkin's shoulder. For a moment, the pressure was returned. His eyes met hers, green and savage in the leaping firelight.

Frank McCandless stopped speaking in a lusty roar that followed him from the platform. Thanking him, Larkin replaced him at the rostrum.

McCandless closed his hand over Angie's icy fingers. How small they are, how smooth, he thought.

A small boy tugged on his coat. Smiling, Frank bent and listened. When he straightened, the smile was gone. He excused himself, following the small boy to the shadows where Senator Farley Carrington awaited him.

Carrington's small body seemed shriveled, his eyes like live coals in his large head.

"I need help," Carrington whispered miserably. "My wife has left me, McCandless. I know I'm an old man. I must seem a fool in her young eyes. But she's all I live for. Perhaps you cannot even understand such a love. I've bought her everything, taken her everywhere. Neglected my work. I stand on the brink of ruin. None of that matters, if only I could have her back."

"Where is she?" McCandless said quietly. He looked over his shoulder at Angie, golden face upturned. Taking Carrington's arm, he accompanied him to the senator's carriage.

"Oh, she comes home. Infrequently. Sometimes gone two and three days." He looked up at McCandless in agony. "Drunk, reeking of whiskey, she comes back to me."

THEY REACHED the carriage. McCandless felt a quiver move up his spine. "And why do you come to me?" he said.

"Don't you know?" the broken man wept. "Don't you know yet? She's seeing your partner. She's drinking with him. Flaunting him in my face. Laughs at me when I beg her to stop. Maybe she loves him. Maybe she doesn't. Maybe she's trying to ruin him in politics. God knows, she's ruined me. I'd like to die. But that would be too easy."

"I didn't know," McCandless admitted. "I do know that Larkin has been spending most of his time in Casper. I thought he was doing electioneering.

"There'll be no election," Carrington threatened. "It's up to you, McCandless. Get her back to me. Or I'll smear it before all the world. Do you understand?"

McCandless turned and watched the torch lights flicker across the handsome face of Jericho Larkin in the rising wind. The hopes of all of us are on him, he thought. Then, he

sent a boy with a message to Angie. She was to return to camp with Jerry, and not to worry if he wasn't home by morning. "Go home," he said to Carrington. His voice fell: "I'll do what I can."

McCandless found Rocky in the second floor room at the Settler Hotel. She was lying across the rumpled bed in a soiled negligee. A half-filled bourbon bottle was on the table at her side. Another rolled on the floor when his boot touched it.

"Jerry honey?" Rocky shoveled her hair out of her eyes and struggled up on her elbows, the negligee slipping off one bare shoulder.

With his knee on the bed, McCandless hunkered over her. When she saw it was not Jerry, her mouth twisted angrily. "Get out!" she flared in a drunken voice. "Get out —or my Jerry will kill you!"

"You're getting out," McCandless answered evenly. When she sank back on the pillow, he pulled her up and slapped her face until she returned to consciousness, fighting him.

With wet towels, and coffee sent up from the cafe, McCandless worked hour after hour over her. The room was a shambles before he had her presentably dressed for the early morning street.

"Listen," he said. "If you go near Larkin again until after this election, I'll beat you until you can't stand. Clear?"

She stared up at him, red hair loose, red mouth twisted with contempt. "You're so wonderful, aren't you?" she spat at him. "You and your wonderful wife. How'd you like to know the truth, Mr. High-and-Mighty? Think she married you because she loves you?" She let her head fall back. Coarse laughter poured from her. "She loves Jericho Larkin. Why do you think I got him back? Because he's trying to stay away from her—because of you! But I don't care why I got him. I want him. That's all I know."

McCandless' face was white with shock. But he forced his voice to be level. "If you loved him at all," he said, "you'd want him to win that election. You wouldn't be trying to defeat him by getting him slandered in the streets."

"The election! Does that matter?"

"If this is to be a free land, a place where a man has a chance to make something of himself, it matters if Larkin is elected or not."

"Even though your wife is crazy about him?" she taunted. "Even though she runs off to follow him to Cheyenne—as she followed him here in the first place?"

And McCandless knew she was telling the truth. Now, everything fell into place, like a puzzle when the missing jigsaw is found. The way Angie had looked the night of the Carrington party. The way Larkin had run to town to drink her from his mind the night of her marriage.

Has Angie been faithful to me? It roared through his mind. As he returned Rocky to her huge house on First street, he was trying to think it out. Was this affair with Rocky a cover? Has Larkin been making love to Angie behind my back? Like a man reeling under a physical beating, McCandless moved down to the livery stables to pick up his horse.

Men spoke to him as he rode into camp; he brushed past their frowning faces without a word. Dropped the reins of his horse before the cook shack; ignored the cook's cheery greeting. He turned his ankle on a projecting rock, but didn't hesitate, limping steadily up the slight incline toward the throbbing derrick.

At the door of Jericho Larkin's shack, he knocked. "All right," Larkin called. "Come in."

Larkin was sitting, one leg swinging over the edge of his desk. Angie was standing behind him. Her flushed face paled and her blue eyes widened when she saw McCandless.

He regarded the studied innocence of the scene, but through a blur of red anger.

"All right, Frank. What is it?" Larkin asked.

"I don't know," McCandless whispered through his tightened throat. "I don't know how to talk to a man like you. What good to say the future of all our people depends on you? Why, I reckon I've covered a thousand miles in the past three months trying to elect you to an office that's nothing but a joke to you. And while I was gone—convenient, wasn't it? You had the whole place to yourself then. Oh, I'm not blaming you, Angie. I know. I know. You married me to be near him. All right, I was a fool. Nobody could love like I loved you. I was too tender; I was too gentle. And you wanted rough arms to hold you; rough lips to kiss you. A man who learned with tramps in a saloon—"

Larkin was upon him before McCandless knew what was happening. He took Larkin's right fist in his face, and Larkin's left and another right. And still McCandless stood there. Blood poured from the side of his mouth and his nostrils. Larkin stopped and stood staring at him.

AND THEN, McCandless struck. Raked a left across Larkin's face, tearing the flesh, rocking his head. His right straightened Larkin tall, and his left into the belly, doubled him.

McCandless was upon him, waiting. Larkin struck only once more, a defensive left. And McCandless cold-

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ly cut him down. Ribboned his face, rocking his head on his shoulders. He heard Angie's frantic screaming. But he didn't stop hitting until, when he pulled Larkin up from the floor, he saw the big man was unconscious.

Face bloody, his breathing labored, he turned upon Angie. "You married me to be near him," he said in a thick voice. "There he is. But I hope you didn't marry me thinking I'm a wealthy man. Everything belongs to him. We had no contract. And I wouldn't touch a penny of his stinking money, even if we had. I'm clearing out, Angie. He's all yours. But first, there's a little matter between us—you and me, Angie. Had I known the woman you are, I'd have collected a long time ago. But collect now—I will!"

He crossed to her and she drew back, screaming at him. He laughed at her. She screamed for Larkin, and McCandless laughed again.

Catching her wrist, he dragged her to him. She fought savagely, like a wildcat. Her golden hair tumbled about her shoulders, her face flamed. She beat at him and kicked as he gathered her up in his arms.

He stalked out of the shack, carrying her screaming and fighting. Imperturbably, he went down the incline toward his shack. Men stopped working to stare, came running to stand with their hands on their hips, and grim smiles on their blackened faces. They went on standing there when the door of McCandless' shack slammed shut behind the boss and his wailing wife.

SIX YOWLING, sweating, happiness-crazed riders loped into the Whiskey Jack company road.

Their yowling woke Angie McCandless. She moved langorously under her covers. Last night with Frank, she had realized for the first time the strength and power of this man she had married. And her whole soul had gone out to him forever. She put out her arm. The place beside her was empty for the first time in three months. She sat up in bed....

Frank McCandless came running from the cook shack to greet the joyous riders. "Our man has won!" they shouted at him. "Jericho Larkin sits in the next legislature at Cheyenne!"

Pounding McCandless on the back, shouting, they climbed the rocky street.

At Larkin's door, McCandless halted them. "I better prepare him," he suggested. "Suppose you men have coffee in the cook shack. My partner and I will be down there soon."

He found Larkin, fully dressed, his face a mass of purple whelps, sprawled across his bed. He shook him awake.

"You've been elected," McCandless bit off the words. "I'm staying only long enough, Jerry, to see you get to that Victory Rally tonight. Our partnership is through, though."

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"How can I go like this," Larkin muttered through cut lips.

"You'll go," McCandless stated. "You'll go—and you'll go through it all. Your face means nothing. It's what's inside you the people have elected. Get dressed. This is a big day for you, Mister Larkin...."

The news came differently to Senator Farley Carrington. Drink in hand, shriveled in his big leather chair, he was alone in his den when the four sad men entered.

"We've lost," said the railroad executive. "Our man was defeated. That renegade Larkin goes to Cheyenne to fight you, in spite of all we could do."

"And look at you," snarled the cattle baron. "Why, that smart young lawyer will rip you to pieces in the Legislature. We won't stand a chance."

THE SENATOR sat staring at them, apathetically. Three of the men departed. The fourth, president of Great Western Oil, remained, his face grave. "I'm sorry, Farley," he said when they were alone, "but you'll have to produce more cash to hold your place with Great Western. Things are worse than ever for us—"

"I've given all I can scrape together!" the old man rasped. "And now you're going to sell me out!"

"We have no choice, Farley. You've spent like a drunken sailor. It's not our fault you find yourself ruined like this."

Carrington waved him from the room. Finally, the old man stood up, shoulders pulled round, large head drooping on his scrawny neck. He walked slowly up the stairs and tried the knob on the door of his wife's room. It was locked. "Rocky," he said. There was no longer any desire in his voice. Everything he'd felt for her was cold and dead.

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Petulantly, she opened the door and stood back so that he could falter in. "I hope," he said sarcastically, "that you won't mind moving into a house less pretentious, my dear? We must sell this one. Wealth has turned to poverty. Whatever we had has run through your fingers. I've spent it all on you."

"I'm not moving anywhere with you," she replied. "Do you think I'd live with you—without money? Why do you think I married you? No. I'm going back to the Golden Slipper. I'm still young. I'm still beautiful. Maybe when Larkin stops yearning after that McCandless woman, he'll come back to me."

"Larkin!" Carrington raged. "You'll never have him, woman. Do you hear me? I've lost you. But he won't have you! He's ruined me—but he'll never have you!"

IN AN HOUR, they'd start for the rally. Angie had just finished dressing when there was a knock on the door. She turned, smiling expectantly. "Frank?"

Larkin came in and closed the door behind him. The cook had been working all day with deer steaks and cold cloths, and although Larkin's face still carried a purple cast, the swelling was gone.

"I'm leaving for Cheyenne after the rally, Angie. I want you to come with me."

"I'm married to Frank, Jerry. Haven't we had scandal enough in our lives?"

He nodded. "Quite enough. But Frank is leaving you. He's broken off the partnership. We've loved each other a long time, Angie. Now, we're free to have each other. I've always wanted you, and I can't get you out of my blood. And you'll find me changed. I'm no hellion any more, Angie. I guess I learned from McCandless, whether I wanted to or not. About honesty and sacrifice. When I go down to the Legislature, the gossips won't know me—"

"I suppose so," she interrupted negligently. Her eyes strayed to the company street beyond her drab window. But there was no sign of the man she sought....

Casper went wild that night.

From all Central Wyoming they gathered for the celebration. Guns boomed all day. Flags and bunting flew as Angie and Larkin drove in triumph through town to the rally field.

The victorious people yelled for Jericho Larkin. Smiling, the tall man mounted the speakers' rostrum. His voice husky, he thanked them for their faith and support.

Angie knew he'd never looked handsomer. Nor was a man in this town with a finer destiny. Now, it was hers to share. But, her eyes clouding with unshed tears, Angie searched for McCandless.

She heard a howl of protest rising from the rear of the crowded grounds. She clambered up on her wooden bench. Over the heads of the milling crowd, she saw Farley Carrington. He reeled down the middle aisle, dark tunic flapping, his hand bulging inside his coat pocket. His face was contorted. Angie fought her way toward him, but the jostling crowd was a solid wedge against her.

She glanced up at the rostrum. Larkin was outlining the things he hoped to do for these people who'd elected him. They need him, she thought wildly. And, as certainly, she knew Carrington meant to kill him.

At that instant, Angie heard the roar of the gun. Saw someone leap upon Carrington, taking the bullet in his shoulder. She thrust her way through the panic-striken mob. Carrington was slumped sobbing when

she reached the rim of people about them. At his feet, in a pool of blood, lay the young Scot, Frank McCandless. . . .

All night, the people of Casper kept vigil outside the hospital. At dawn, the haggard doctor stepped out on the porch, the sun slanting across his gray, smiling face. "Mr. McCandless is going to be all right," he told them simply.

At noon, a nurse entered McCandless' room. "There's a Mr. Larkin to see you," she said. "And your wife. Mr. Larkin has a train to catch, and hopes you'll see him before he goes."

McCandless shook his head. "I've nothing to say to them. Tell them that. I've nothing more to say to either of them."

THE MONTHS went by. And Casper continued growing like a wild young weed. For the well brought in by McCandless and Larkin was rich beyond any dream in the history before that moment.

Frank McCandless moved through the crowds surging along Casper's Main Street. About the town was the look of great wealth. But of that great wealth, Frank McCandless owned exactly one silver dollar. He looked about for a saloon.

Back in Casper after bumming around, he'd had plenty of chances to prospect in oil. But, somehow, he lacked incentive. Things wouldn't be like they were. And he didn't want them any other way.

Someone touched his arm.

He hadn't seen Jericho Larkin since the night of the Victory rally, almost a year ago. Larkin, in fine clothes, looking successful.

"Hello, Frank."

A year is a long, lonely time to think in, and it's difficult to go on hating a man.

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"Jerry. How are you?"

"I'm all right, Frank. Good to be back up here. How's it with you?"

"Oh, I'm doing fine. Fine," McCandless lied.

"And how's Angie?" Jericho Larkin said.

McCandless paled. "Don't joke with me, Larkin." He shrugged. "I've not seen her. You know that. I thought her with you."

Larkin frowned. "And I thought she was up here with you. When I left, she said she meant to wait here until you would have her back again."

McCandless stared. His heart hammered raggedly. He managed to keep his voice level. "Well, I've not been here, really. Working in Oklahoma—"

"Listen to me, McCandless. For a whole year, I've been down in Cheyenne working as though you stood at my back with a loaded gun. Legislature's out now, Frank, and...well, I've taken a lease—"

McCandless tried not to sound too anxious. "Have you, man? Where is it?"

Larkin told him. McCandless spat in the dust. "Worthless. You couldn't pray oil out of that place."

"We could try, Frank. I've been banking our money partners. It's still fifty-fifty. Just like—"

McCandless put out his hand. There were unashamed tears in Larkin's eyes as he took it.

They started down the busy street. And as they approached the travel station, Frank McCandless saw her. There was a large crowd, but among them, she was like a jewel catching the flame of a brilliant sun.

"Angie!"

She looked up and saw him. Her face twisted as though she were going to cry. And then, she was running toward him.

THE END

ACOMA INDIAN

By A. Dobe

ACOMA IS the name of a tribe of Pueblo Indians and a town in New Mexico. The town of Acoma is situated on a high mesa rising 400 feet above the surrounding plain on which lies the Pueblo farmlands. It has been said that it is the oldest inhabited settlement in the United States. It was discovered by Coronado's army in 1540. Its original population was 1,000. The present population is about 500.

A WASTE OF LONGHORNS

By Wes Turner

THERE WAS a period in Texas when cattle were hardly worth stealing. The hide of a cow was worth more than the live animal. That was in the late sixties and early seventies, the same period when thousands of cattle from the overstocked ranges were being taken on the long trail drives to northern markets and ranges. Of the multitude of cattle that were left, especially in southern Texas, many hundreds were slaughtered for their hides alone. The waste of animals was as great as that which occurred in the wholesale slaughtering of buffalo for their hides.

By the hundreds and thousands, cattle were driven to south Texas slaughtering plants. Yearlings were sorted out and sold for a dollar a head. The other cattle were skinned, the hides saved, and the meat slid down chutes into the rivers or the Gulf. In the Brazos River, for instance, the catfish feasted on raw beef and grew to immense size. An establishment at the mouth of the Brazos attracted sharks by the score, so that people dared not go swimming in that locality.

The operators of these hiding plants would buy out a brand, then drive in huge herds of cattle. Rustlers did big business, also, since the cattle were not valuable enough to be properly protected against thievery. So if a man wanted to make some extra money, he found it not too difficult to collect a herd for some slaughtering outfit. One way was to set a grass fire, burning off the feed, so that the cattle were near starvation.

Another source of supply for the hide hunters was the winter drift herds. That was before the days of drift fences or line riders. When the winter northers blew long and cold, cattle drifted southward from distances of hundreds of miles. Down in the south country, they would pile up, eat everything in sight that was within

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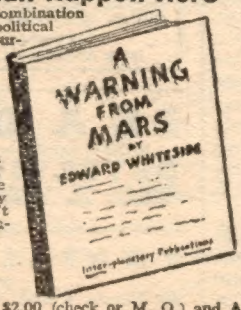

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their reach from the watering places, and then weaken from starvation. Came a wet, cold spell, and dead cattle paved the land. People from all the little towns and settlements would turn out to skin dead cattle. Some even took advantage of the situation to make dead cattle out of some that might have lived, so as to add more skins to the piles they had for sale.

It is no wonder that the regular ranchers, who were still interested in raising beef, became alarmed at the appalling waste of longhorns and the inroads being made into their own herds by these hide rustlers. A series of range wars developed, but over hides rather than the sheep which a little later were the cause of extensive warfare. The ranchers organized, asked the help of the Rangers, and hired gunmen to help them protect their rights.

They fought to prevent their cattle from being driven off by hide thieves, as well as to save for themselves the hides of any cattle which had died. If there was an extensive "die-up", from starvation or some other reason, the sale of the hides would at least give them expense money. And cowmen did not like to see the longhorns wasted, however cheap they might be, just when hopes were developing of profitably disposing of the animals at northern railroad points, and of reviving the cattle industry by using the great northern ranges.

A MEAN MAN

By R. U. Mark

ONE OF the classics of the Panhandle country of Texas is the incident which Jim East, cattleman and later sheriff of Oldham County, is supposed to have told on himself.

The story illustrates the hardships which men in those days underwent in the vigilance organizations, when posses went on extended man hunts after the numerous bandits of the times. With no organized law, or only scanty law enforcement facilities, it fell upon the respectable ranchers and other settlers to do something about the too-plentiful bad men. Something had to be done, and the posses usually did it.

Someone asked Jim East one day, "Jim, what would you say was the meanest thing you ever did to anyone?"

Answered Jim, "Well, I'm sort of ashamed of it, but the meanest thing I ever did was to my horse. It was the time a bunch of us were on the hunt for Billy the Kid, the time we caught up with him finally and took him to jail.

"We'd ridden all day in the cold without eating, and there was no food around when we camped for the night. But there was still a little corn for the horses in the feedbags which we carried for them. I watched my horse chomping away on his corn as long as I could stand it. It was mean of me, all right, but I reached in that feedbag and helped myself to some of the corn, and ate it myself!"

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